

Investigating the folklore of the oregon country fair essay sample

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Intricate hand-made crafts, enticing entertainment, and phenomenal cuisine are only a few small aspects of the great Oregon Country Fair. The Oregon Country Fair is a three-day annual, non-profit festival in Veneta, Oregon which can be best described as a celebration within a close-knit community of people of all walks of life, within nature. The OCF was established in 1969 as a benefit for an alternative school and over the years has become one of Oregon's most notable celebrations. It is where people come to leave behind all of the complications of everyday life and immerse themselves in a rich and very accepting culture.

OCF attracts many different types of people, although the main population consists of those who value the more natural lifestyle such as environmentalists or hippies, but the fair welcomes many other types of individuals with open arms as well. I got a chance to sit down and interview two gentlemen who attend and are veterans of the Oregon Country Fair. The first person I interviewed was a thirty year old man named Tauren Saunders who has been going to the Oregon Country Fair for the last ten years, and believes that he will be a part of the event for the rest of his life. He actually camps about a half of a mile away from the OCF in the Darling Reunion campground with hundreds of other fair goers. The other interviewee is a twenty-five year old male, named Alex Johnson, who has been working in a vendor at the fair for four years and has been attending the fair since he was a child.

Located in the woods of Veneta, the OCF consists of hundreds of vendors, stages, and activities throughout a wide trail that covers several acres of

land. “ The vendors are an important part of the experience”, says Saunders “ they have everything from food and crafts to furniture even.” Each vendor has their own hand-crafted site, most of them look like tree houses and are built off of preexisting trees. On the official Oregon Country Fair website there is a list of all the vendors at the fair and it is quite extensive.

Everything there is hand-made; the arts and crafts are created year-round for the Oregon Country fair. You can find just about anything there such as: wood and metal work, toys, clothing, textiles, stones, pottery, instruments, body work, jewelry, leather goods, masks, glass, hats, and tons more.

People even create things at the actual fair like jewelry or paintings.

Saunders recalls a couple of years ago, how he bought a pair of patchwork shorts and the woman who made them “ had just about a story for every stitch in those shorts.” The fair gives people the time to express the hard work and process that goes in to making each item, it gives the items more meaning and depth. Many of the vendors are to be used at the fair, body art is a good example of this, people get things painted or hennaed in various parts of the body and attend the rest of the fair with it. It is very common to see women walking around with their breasts painted, or pregnant women with their protruding bellies painted; In any other event this exposure would seem obscene, but within the folklore of the OCF it is not only accepted, it is celebrated.

In addition to the craft vendors, are the food vendors which can be found all throughout the fair. All of the vendors are vegetarian and vegan friendly but there are many of those that serve meat dishes as well. Saunders recalls, “

The food vendors at OCF remind me of the Saturday market but bigger, no matter what you have a taste for you can find it if you are willing to do a little searching.” Alex Jonson, my other interviewee, actually works at a food vendor at the Oregon Country Fair called Blazing Sally’s where they sell fruit salads, green salads, and other fruit and vegetable items. I asked Johnson what it was like to work at one of the food vendors at OCF, he said, “ It is very fast paced with a lot of people working in a small environment, so you get to know all of your coworkers really well, really fast, it is hot, fun, and very rewarding.” When you work for a vendor you get free admission to the fair and you get to camp inside the fair, which is sixty dollars saved, and even more if you include camping. You also get all of your meals for free within the fair if you work, it’s a good way to get yourself to try new things.

Wandering through the fair on its own seems to be a shared favorite experience; there is something to treat the eye everywhere you look. There are several different areas that are themed, such as mushroom forest in which there are many pieces of petrified wood carved into mushrooms or energy park where there are many booths and vendors whose focus is self-sustainability. While walking through the fair there are many parades through the day some are on stilts, and some just have very elaborate costumes of things like fairies or animals. Everyone is welcome to interact with the parade people and even follow along and join the parade themselves. Saunders states that there is a tradition while wandering called random pocket trade, this is when you approach an individual, state random pocket trade, and trade with the individual whatever is in your pocket; it can

be anything but trash or cash is the only rule. This trade is not only fun, it is a way of meeting new people and involving others in your experience.

Johnson states that his favorite part of the fair is the music venues.

Throughout the fair there are about ten stages, the main stage has the headliners for the fair that day and the rest of the stages consist of shows, dances and other bands. Saunders reflects, " I remember one year there was a magician, he was hilarious and his tricks were dope too." There is also a man who is at the fair every year demonstrating how to create fire without any tools or fuel, " It is pretty impressive to watch", says Johnson, " and this guy just posts up on the side of the trail, no stage needed and there's always a crowd around him." There is a wide array of professional dancers who occupy many of the stages such as Mexican dancing, Indian dancing, or even swing dancing. The stage that will always remain the same year after year is the drum pit, " It can be heard throughout the whole fair and is very intense to join in and dance with", says Saunders.

Camping inside the fair is said to be the best way to experience the fair, but if you don't have an in at the fair there are several close campgrounds that host the fairgoers. A quarter of a mile from the fair is a campground called Shady Rest, and another quarter mile away are Darling Reunion and Quiet Camp campgrounds. Saunders stayed in the Darling Reunion campground, he describes it as, " a home away from home" he further states that it is the best campground to stay at if you are looking for one big party, and it has vendors of its own and is the best place to stay during fair next to staying in the actual fair." Everyone decorates their campsites with lights and lots of

tapestries, some people even bring teepees to camp in which is a decoration in their own. Many of the camps have names and themes like one camp Saunders described as the red light camp in which they had only red lights all throughout their campsite. He said that his neighbors in the campground called themselves the Krispy Kats and had cat décor and a cut out of two cats which people could stick their heads in for a photo as they're wandering through.

Saunders shared many of the traditions which are practiced within the Darling Reunion campground, such as while walking around the campground or while in your own site it is etticute to say happy fair, its as if you are saying hello and wishing someone a good time at the same time, this also takes place at the fair but not as prominently because it is so crowded. It is also tradition to participate in the hippy wave, this is when one person lets out a yell, then the people next to them yell, then the people next to them yell, and so forth until it has gone through the entire camp. The walk to the fair from the campground is also a tradition. You gather all your friends and walk in the normally ninety-degree weather, but on the side of the road there are vendors selling mostly food and in front of the vendors are water misters that cool you off as you walk by. These traditions create a bonding between all of the campers.

He says that his favorite part is at night, “ when everyone has consumed whatever drugs they please, and everything is glowing.” He explains that it is tradition to have a glow stick attire and where anything else that glows and wander throughout the camp to see everyone's glow stick art at their

sites. The drugs taken at the fair are primarily marijuana, LSD, and MDMA (AKA ecstasy), Saunders explains that they are used to relax and let go of inhibitions to let yourself truly enjoy the experience but some people do not partake in drugs at all and share an equally enjoyable time. Drugs at the OCF seem to be used as entheogens to further lose one's self in the experience. There is a joke everyone plays on each other called "hippy fishing" in which a person ties a glow stick to a piece of fishing wire, sets it in the middle of the trail, and waits for someone to attempt to pick it up. When they do try and pick it up the fisher pulls it away as if the glow stick is trying to escape, when the victim realizes what is happening everyone gets a good laugh out of it.

Also at night is the drum circle around the fire pit in which everyone dances in and out of throughout the night. The fire pit is set up in rings with the most intensity in the inner ring closest to the fire, and then there are five more rings around that with drummers scattered all throughout. It creates a sense of communitas among the people in which everyone loses themselves and is sharing the same experience. Once you get tired at the campfire right next to it is usually another drum circle, but in the middle of this one are the fire dancers. These are trained individuals who can dance, throw, and hula-hoop with fire which is very entrancing to witness. The fire dancers move to the beat and swing around their flame engrossed instruments to create a spectacle of themselves.

The night life camping inside the fair is similar to Darling Reunion campground but it is much more elaborate. All of the tree houses that are

above the vendors open which makes the fair much more fun and exciting to explore. “ There are glow sticks and glowing people everywhere you look and fire dancers on almost every stage” says Johnson. He says it gets pretty crazy at night because it is when the people that have been working all day get to party and do whatever drug they want. Johnson states, “ The only thing that holds you back from going all night, is the fact that you have to be up in the morning, ready to work.”

If you are lucky enough to have the time to stay until Monday it is fun at the fair how the vendors all go to the parking lot and everything is bartered or sold for very cheap. Johnson said that is how he got his favorite shirt with the Deadhead bear on it for a very cheap price. Saunders also stays at the fair until Monday because the camp is pretty emptied out by then, so it is nice to relax and reflect on the weekend with the remaining campers. Many people have their own instruments and will play old Grateful Dead and grass roots songs. Both individuals Saunders and Johnson say that leaving the fair is the worst part. Johnson says it’s because it is a lot of hard work to help and pack up the vendor and pack up his own things as well. While Saunders says he dreads going back to reality and wishes he could live at the fair.

Through these interviews and researching the Oregon Country fair I have found a goldmine of folklore. There is the folklore of the traditions and interactions between fair goers and the relationships they create through the fair. There are examples of folklore in all of the hand-made crafts and the processes and work that goes into them. The Oregon Country Fair has an abundance of unique folklore that comes out for the spirit of the event, from

singing songs to running around at night by the light of glow sticks. Every little aspect of the fair works as a text to the fair making it the grand event that it is and the communal experience that is received. Saunders states, “The fairgoers are all different from one another but they all share the same spirit for the experience, and I think that’s why it is so fun and you can let yourself go and find your true identity.”

For some people, like Saunders the Oregon Country Fair can be viewed as a rite of passage. First you are separated from your normal life. Second you experience the liminal stage in which you partake in the activities of the fair such as: dancing in a drum circle, trying some food you never have, or just wandering and observing all of the sights at the fair. During this liminal stage there is a sense of communitas that is shared among everyone at the fair. The third stage, integration, is when you go back home with a better sense of self. For others, like Johnson the fair is an experience in which they can enjoy the company and entertainment of people just like themselves. The lore of the fair is everywhere because everything is made by the people, for the people and that creates an atmosphere of common ground among everyone. The folk of the Oregon Country Fair are the most important part, I found it unanimous that connecting with people is the greatest take-away from the whole experience.

Sources:

Alex Johnson 503-319-4379

Tauren Saunders sail.com 503-258-7913

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