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For the St. Paul Rodeo

## UP A TREE

*St. Paul Rodeo tradition features arborvitae in arena, around grounds*

St. Paul, Ore. (June 4, 2024) – [Ask any pro rodeo cowboy or cowgirl who's competed at the St. Paul Rodeo, what they remember about the arena, and "trees" probably come up.](#)

The St. Paul Rodeo, this year July 2-6, has had trees, more correctly called arborvitae, in the arena for the last 80-some years.

The tradition started in the 1940s, with trees being used to outline the track for the many horse races that were held: the Hop Buggy Race, the Pony Express race, the St. Paul Derby, the Cowgirl Race, the Boys Pony Race.

The early trees were small Douglas firs that came from nearby groves. For years, the rodeo grounds committee would go into the forest to cut the trees.

One year, Gene Smith, who was the rodeo secretary, noticed arborvitae at his nephew Bruce Ernst's nursery, and decided they would be easier to "plant" in the arena than cut trees would. The cut trees required permits and fell over easily, whereas the arborvitae had root balls that added weight so they wouldn't fall over and could be planted in someone's yard after rodeo week.

Ernst Nursery, in rural St. Paul, is owned by Bruce, and supplies several hundred arborvitae to the rodeo.

Twelve of them go in the arena; the others are used around the grounds for decoration. Bruce and his staff deliver them two days before the rodeo starts.

Arborvitae are not trees, even though they're often referred to as such.

The team ropers can gauge their competition run by the arborvitae: if they're riding by them when they rope their steer, they're not going to win any money.

Even the clown JJ Harrison gets in on the tradition. During each show, he uses them as hurdles, being timed as he makes the "arborvitae run." The fans love it.

As it goes with a lot of the St. Paul population, Bruce and his staff are second and third generation of St. Paul Rodeo volunteers.

He is a grandson of Carl Smith, one of the founders; his mom, Mary Ann Smith Ernst, served as the 1941 St. Paul Rodeo Queen.

Bruce's cousin, Kim Ernst Stone, is controller for Ernst Nursery. Her granddad, Maurice Smith, was a brother to Carl and also one of the founders. Her mom, Shirley Smith Ernst, was the 1944 queen.

Bruce, a St. Paul Rodeo Association member, does more than provide arborvitae. He runs a gate, helps set up beer tents, and helps wherever she is needed.

Kim calls herself a "heavy volunteer," having worked in the Tack Room Saloon and helped with the parish chicken booth and the high school booster club concession stands. She and her husband work shifts in different areas, during each day of the event.

"It takes all of us to put on this rodeo," Bruce said.

Ernst Nursery grows about 300,000 arborvitae a year, shipping them nationwide.

Sometimes a bull will take out an arborvitae, or one will get broken. The spare arborvitae are under the scoreboard, ready to be put to use.

And the tradition continues.

The "trees" are fitting for the rodeo, Bruce says, which is part of "Cowboy Christmas," the richest part of the rodeo season where there are so many rodeos, cowboys and cowgirls have more chances to make money because of the Independence Day holiday.

The St. Paul Rodeo takes place July 2-6 this year, with nightly performances at 7:30 pm and a 1:30 matinee on July 4.

Tickets are available online at [StPaulRodeo.com](http://StPaulRodeo.com). They range in price from \$20 to \$60. For more information, visit the website or call 800.237.5920.

A “tree” – arborvitae -is in the forefront as team ropers Rhen Richard and Jeremy Buhler compete in the background. The St. Paul Rodeo is known nationwide as the rodeo with trees in the arena. Photo by Kent Soule, Hoot Creek.



Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame member Larry Mahan at the 1969 St. Paul Rodeo. The rodeo has had trees in its arena, marking the horse race track, since the 1940s. Photo by Larry Jones.



