Cheyenne, Wyoming, Where Tourism Really Is Everybody’s Business

By Richard Kelley

Those who have read Saturday Briefing for almost any period of time know that I strongly believe that “Tourism Is Everybody’s Business.” The benefits of Travel & Tourism go far beyond local airports, hotels, restaurants, and automobile rental companies. The income and job opportunities that visitors create are felt throughout any community where Travel & Tourism is part of the economy. Last week, I found a perfect example of this when I visited Cheyenne, Wyoming, to enjoy the many activities of Cheyenne Frontier Days (CFD). While there, I also discovered a surprising link between Cheyenne and Hawaii.

Cheyenne was established in 1867 at the point where the Union Pacific Railroad crosses Crow Creek, a tributary of the South Platte River, about 100 miles north of Denver, Colorado. Today, with a population of just 90,000, it is not a very big place by U.S. standards. Its economy is driven mainly by the presence of Wyoming’s state capital, ranching, agriculture, and the F.E. Warren Air Force Base, home to Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), part of our country’s strategic defense.

In 1897, just 30 years after the town was laid out, a small group of community volunteers decided they might be able help the economy if they staged a cowboy get-together with a rodeo and other activities. That first event was a success, and over the past 113 years, Cheyenne Frontier Days has grown tremendously into a two-week celebration of Western heritage with parades, barbecues, flapjack breakfasts, and premier country and western concerts. The featured event is the world’s largest outdoor rodeo, dubbed “The Daddy of Them All,” where 1,500 contestants vie for over $1 million in prizes. Paid attendance exceeds 100,000, and many more participate in the parades and other free activities.

I enjoyed the parade, which lasted nearly one-and-a-half hours. It seemed as if everyone from the Air Force to the blacksmith, the undertaker and every youth group in town participated. Our men and women in uniform were rightly honored and applauded. The USAF Thunderbirds screamed overhead. In a pleasant expression of defiance of those who would have courts impose rigid limitations on our religious freedoms, a Christian group went right down main street with a float modeled after a church (gasp!), and a farmer drove a tractor with a sign proclaiming “Praise God.” (OMG!)

With only 13 full-time employees, the CFD staff directs it all. “How do they do that?” you ask. The secret is the more than 2,500 community volunteers who put in countless hours for over two weeks doing everything from mucking out the stables in all kinds of weather.

Locals say, “It’s the Cheyenne thing to do.”

I discovered the Hawaii connection while strolling through the Old West Museum on the grounds of Frontier Park.

In a section dedicated to the Cheyenne Frontier Days Hall of Fame, the very Hawaiian name Ikua Purdy grabbed my eye immediately.

A little research reminded me that Ikua Purdy, born in Waimea on the Big Island of Hawaii, was the great-grandson of John Palmer Parker, the founder of the Parker Ranch, and Kipikane, granddaughter of Kamehameha the Great. Purdy grew up roping horses and cattle on the slopes of Mauna Kea. Most of the cattle were wild, giving ropers only a single split-second chance to grab them, as they flew out of the kīpuka (“a densely overgrown piece of land surrounded by lava”).

It must have been quite an adventure when, in 1908, Ikua Purdy,
along with fellow paniolo (Hawaiian cowboys) Jack Low and Archie Ka’au’a, boarded a ship to travel to the West Coast and then continued overland, crossing two mountain ranges, to participate in the Frontier Days Rodeo in Cheyenne.

“According to Patti Cook and Doris Purdy, writing for the Paniolo Preservation Society, Purdy and his companions “were an instant curiosity with their odd slouched hats and colorful hatbands, peculiar saddles and bright clothes – an exotic blend of Hawaiian and vaquero [Mexican/Spanish cowboy] influence and tradition. What’s more, they spoke a foreign language – native Hawaiian. Cheyenne did not know what to make of the paniolo. They believed they didn’t stand a chance; they were riding borrowed mounts.”

“In the World Championship finals, Ikua Purdy won the Steer-Roping contest in 56 seconds. Archie Ka’au’a came in second, and Jack Low, despite suffering an asthma attack during the competition, placed sixth. Against the best American cowboys, Hawaii’s paniolo proved their worth.”

Hawaii filmmaker Edgy Lee captured the story of Ikua Purdy beautifully in the award-winning documentary, Paniolo o Hawaii - Cowboys of the Far West. The DVD, narrated in part by Willie Nelson, is available online at the Parker Ranch Store.

“In 1999, Ikua Purdy was voted into the National Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame, the first Hawaiian ever to be nominated. That same year, he was the first inductee to the Paniolo Hall of Fame established by the Oahu Cattlemen’s Association. In 2003, a large bronze statue of Purdy roping a steer was placed in Waimea town on the Big Island, erected by the Paniolo Preservation Society.”

Even in 2010, rodeo fans are talking about that day, over a century ago, “when the Hawaiians took Cheyenne.” And, while Cheyenne locals may say that volunteering to help Frontier Days is “the Cheyenne thing to do,” it’s really just a Western way of acknowledging that “Tourism Is Everybody’s Business!”

Flag bearers on horseback open the rodeo

A Christian farmer drove his tractor in the parade with a sign proclaiming “Praise God”

Saddle Bronc Riding - Cowboy in control

Saddle Bronc Riding - Barely hanging on

Saddle Bronc Riding - Bronc 1, Cowboy 0

Bareback Bronc Riding - Ride ‘em cowboy!

It’s all about the time in Barrell Racing

Steer Roping - A Cheyenne Rodeo favorite

Bull Riding - Hanging on for 8 seconds seems like an eternity!