

The 27th Annual Homer Davenport Days is this weekend

Drawing attention to Silverton's most famous artist

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Amid the excitement over speeding couches down the street and the beat of live music, it's often quite easy to forget why Silverton celebrates in such a flamboyant way each year. Simply driving through the town's main drag, anyone can see the banners anticipating Homer Davenport Days, graced with a caricature of a man's face.

The man behind the celebration

The ubiquitous image is a self portrait of none other than the celebration's namesake — Homer Davenport himself.

The now-famous artist was born in 1867 in Waldo Hills, south of Silverton and near GeerCrest farm.

When he was young, Davenport was interested in the arts, spending much of his time drawing. His father recognized his son's talent as an artist, and, while many during this era of pioneers would have scolded their sons for spending his daylight hours drawing instead of doing chores, Davenport's father encouraged Homer to pursue his interests.

In 1890, the budding artist joined a Silverton trombone band as a drummer, along with many other local residents. Soon thereafter, he had the opportunity to travel to Portland with the trombone band to play at a campaign rally for Grover Cleveland.

“He was an opportunist,” said Silverton historian Jeff Brekas. “When he went to Portland, he took the opportunity to show his work to the editor of the ‘Portland Mercury,’ and it wasn't long that they, too, noticed his talent and hired him.”

After being sent on assignment to New Orleans to draw a prize fight, Davenport caught the attention of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. Being the opportunist that he was, Davenport showed Hearst his work, and the tycoon immediately hired the Silvertonian for the “San Francisco Examiner.”

Davenport's art was seen daily across the country. In fact, his 1904 “New York Evening Mail” cartoon of Uncle Sam and Theodore Roosevelt, not only helped Roosevelt win election as the 26th President, but became an instant classic.

After this syndicated cartoon, Davenport and Roosevelt formed a strong friendship, and Roosevelt even sent Davenport to the faraway lands of Syria to acquire Arabian horses from Bedouin tribes, although no one expected Davenport to successfully complete this

odyssey. Much to the surprise of the President and peers, he returned to the United States with 27 Arabian horses, relatives of which are still bred across the country.

In 1905, as part of a Lewis and Clark Expedition celebration, Davenport arranged for a train to transport four Arabian horses along with a plethora of Davenport's beloved birds to Portland from his New Jersey farm. For three months, a cabin was set up in Davenport's honor for the exposition, and as a result of his enthusiasm for Oregon, many of his wealthy and famous friends visited the exposition.

This, some believe, is what put Oregon on the map. After the exposition, Oregon's population greatly expanded.

In 1912, Davenport was sent to cover the arrival of the Titanic's survivors. The frigid air gave Davenport a chill, which turned into pneumonia. The lauded cartoonist died May 2, 1912, just days after he became ill. His remains were shipped by rail to Silverton, his original hometown and lifetime love, and he is buried in Silverton Cemetery. The funeral was one of the largest ones that Silverton has ever seen.

More than a block party

The summer festival in Silverton hasn't always been Homer Davenport Days.

In fact, the August event began in 1946 as the Silverton Harvest Festival, when local farmers gathered for a harvest breakfast in Coolidge-McClaine Park. In 1948, the 10-year-old Lions Club took over the breakfast, transforming it into a fundraiser for the club, giving the money back to the community in different forms. According to Brekas, the Lions Club is one of the oldest fraternal organizations associated with Davenport Days.

In the 1960s, citizen Harvey Mikkelson moved the event to Brooks, beginning Brooks Power Land Festival, and stripping Silverton of its traditional celebration.

Then, in 1976, as part of the nation's bicentennial celebration, Silverton began a weekend breakfast, which included a parade and a pageant in the local high school based on Davenport's book "The Country Boy." It fast became an annual family festival, complete with a bluegrass dance and art booths.

The Silverton Art Association began to participate in the planning, and around 1980, Silverton citizen Gus Fredrickson had the idea to honor Davenport during the festival.

"It's not only about Homer Davenport," Brekas said. "It's important that every small community have a founder's festival."

"Davenport wasn't Silverton's founder," he said, "but he was a prominent citizen that many people know about. It's a way for us to celebrate our community and celebrate one

of our celebrities, who even wrote a book [“The Country Boy”] that tugs at the community’s heartstrings.

“That’s what Silverton is all about.”