



Gator Jambalaya and tater balls at Gator Jack's



Rigby lake



Farnsworth TV and Pioneer Museum



Old sugar mill

Rigby

Fertile Soil and Fertile Minds



Attic Annie's Antiques



They come from as far away as Russia and the Isle of Skye. Most are likely on their way to somewhere else — like Yellowstone National Park — when the sign catches their eye: “Welcome to Rigby, Birthplace of Television.”

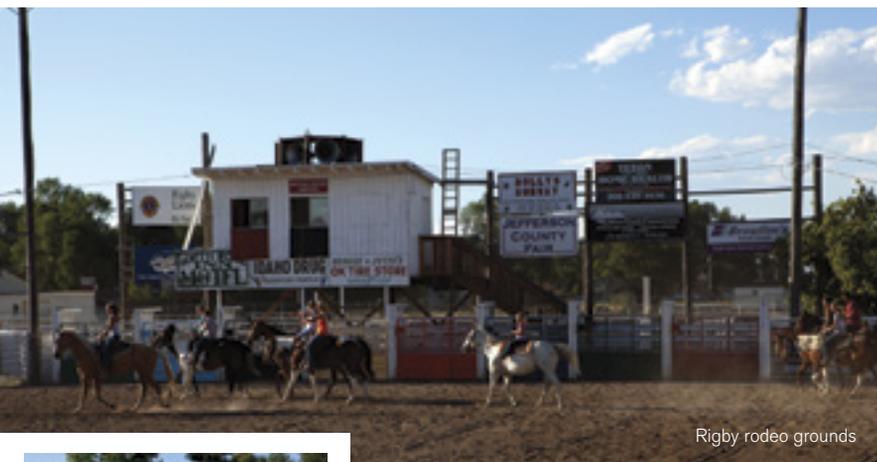
An Idaho town of fewer than 4,000 people the birthplace of television? If time permits and curiosity gets the better of them, travelers exit the highway and head into the heart of town. The Jefferson County Historical Society and Museum is hard to miss.

By Larry Hiller

Photos by Kevin Kiernan



Swimmers train at Rigby lake



Rigby rodeo grounds



Attic Annie's Antiques

Some visitors are openly skeptical until they hear the story and see the primitive television equipment on display. It's true. Philo T. Farnsworth (1906-1971), a high school boy in this small town 14 miles north of Idaho Falls, worked out the basics of electronic television and even diagrammed his ideas on a chalkboard for one of his teachers.

It's probably a stretch to suggest that the famously fertile soil of the Snake River Plain had something to do with it. But Rigby, Idaho, and nearby hamlets have produced what farmers call "high yield per acre" when it comes to producing inventive, creative people.

A Veritable Who's Who

Besides Farnsworth — whose list of major inventions is amazing — there was Claude ZoBell (1905-1989), whose pioneering discoveries in oceanography and microbiology are honored even today. Another Rigby resident, Wayne Quinton (1921-present), designed numerous important medical devices, including a widely used lightweight cardiac treadmill.

There are literary achievers, too. Vardis Fisher (1895-1968) authored 26 historical novels, including "Mountain Man," upon which the movie "Jeremiah Johnson" was based. And Clyde Ormond (1906-1985) was widely known for his books and articles on the outdoors. He also patented four inventions.

Then there's favorite native son Larry Wilson (1938-present), NFL Hall of Famer, who continually invented new ways to frustrate opposing quarterbacks. The free safety was famous for toughness, once intercepting a pass with casts on both hands due to broken wrists.

Cold Winters, Warm People

The soil may be fertile, but winters here are long and harsh. Native Americans and European trappers had long roamed the area searching for game and furs, but no one settled permanently until 1884, when Mormon pioneers arrived. The town, named for one of its first settlers, incorporated in 1903.

Agriculture remains the economic mainstay of Rigby. Potato, wheat and barley fields stretch in all directions, their summer green interspersed with bright yellow fields of canola. Residents not involved in agriculture often find employment in the nearby cities of Idaho Falls and Rexburg, or at the Idaho National Laboratory in the high desert 80 miles west of Rigby. Broulim's Fresh Foods, a major regional grocery chain, had its start in Rigby in 1922 and remains a strong presence in the community.

Describing the town's character, Mayor Keith Smith says simply, "Some of the best people in the world live here." People look out for each other, and when they see a need, they step in to help fill it. Smith cites the example of Lisa Ellis, a loan officer at Zions Bank in Rigby and organizer of the town's Early Iron Festival. Held on the third weekend of August, it's an eclectic show of antique and restored farm equipment and implements, cars, and motorcycles. On the Saturday of the event, Ellis' co-workers at the bank donate the entire day to helping. Proceeds go to various local charities and causes.

The festival began four years ago when a young family was in a boating accident on the Snake River. Ellis, who lives nearby, helped pull some of the family from the river. Impressed by the work of the Jefferson County Quick Response Unit and to help provide support, Ellis organized the fundraiser that has since become a popular tradition.

Blending New and Old

It's not just the Early Iron Festival that's eclectic. It's the whole town. New influences are arriving to complement the pioneer heritage. For example, Me 'n' Stan's restaurant has long been a local favorite, with great homemade soups and pies. Now, there's also the New Star restaurant, serving Chinese dishes made by an owner/chef trained in China. And there's Gator Jack's, serving, among other things, jambalaya and alligator gumbo.

The town has, as one would expect, an annual rodeo or stampede. But there's also the bed race, a wacky event with teams pushing beds on wheels with pajama-clad teammates lying on them.

Pulling together this mix of new and old can be challenging, Mayor Smith admits. And there is some resistance to things like upgrading old infrastructure. But if any town can do it Rigby can. Surely a town so good at producing inventors can reinvent itself. 🍷



Sandwich from Gator Jack's



Veterans Memorial



Antique railcar

