



PAINTEED PONY

**THE COUNTRY'S
OLDEST WEEKLY RODEO
ISN'T OUT WEST**

BY ANNIE STOLTIE PHOTOGRAPHS BY EWAN BURNS

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HERE THE PAVEMENT ends, the West begins—that's what Painted Pony is," says the rodeo's co-owner Shana Graham. She's not kidding. From

woods-y Route 9N that twists west from Lake George village, you pass roadside motels and cabin colonies, mom-and-pop restaurants and kitschy campground signs. But turn onto Howe Road in Lake Luzerne, bump along until you reach Painted Pony, and you might as well be in Texas or Montana: Everywhere you look are people in Western attire, including volunteers from the local Lions Club who greet visitors with down-home hospitality, tipping their cowboy hats, showing them where to park their pickups or Priuses.

Country music spills from the entryway of the Longhorn Saloon, a roadhouse with a bar the length of a bowling alley. Outside is a buffet with deep pans of barbecue, baked beans and creamy coleslaw. There's a mechanical bull and a gift shop stocked with lassos, hats and other souvenirs. The crowd—clusters of teenagers, families with their babies, older couples who hang toward the back—moseys to the grandstand, ready for the theme park-like entertainment they expect from this corner of the Adirondacks. (Magic Forest, Water Slide World and Six Flags' Great Escape are just down the road.) With fried



dough, nachos, snow cones, cups of beer and soda bottles in hand, they take their seats on the wooden-plank bleachers and then, like that, the rodeo kicks off. Shana Graham gallops around the arena on a chestnut quarter horse, the gigantic American flag she carries billowing in her wake. Rodeo contestants, also on horseback, join Graham for "the Grand Entry." The massive horses, the wise-cracking announcers with Southern accents (despite one who says he's from Glens Falls), a rodeo clown and the "Star-Spangled Banner" belted out by Graham's 11-year-old daughter, Gabby—it's something else.

Still, Shana later says, "This is no showdeo."

After the opening act comes the real action: calf-roping, steer-wrestling, barrel-racing, bronco- and bull-riding—all feats of athleticism. The cowboys and cowgirls in the arena are professionals, from as far away as Australia, competing here—and at rodeos across the country—for cash prizes, year-end titles and a shot at circuit finals or the ultimate, national finals in Las Vegas, earned by gaining points at each rodeo.

The investment is physical, financial and emotional, which bonds the contestants and staff. "We're like a family," says Shana. Some of the 40 or so Painted Pony employees "have been here year after year ... we couldn't do what we do without them." Everyone looks out for everyone else. "If there's a bucking horse in the arena," she says, "everyone's jumping the fence to help."

SHAWN GRAHAM BROKE his neck in 2000 when he was bucked while saddle bronc-riding. Shawn grew up around this region's dude ranches—Roaring Brook, 1000 Acres and Rydin' Hy. His dad, Skip, was a rodeo clown and steer-wrestler; his mom, Janet, was a barrel-racer. After his accident, Shawn retired from riding bulls and saddle horses, but wanted to stay in rodeo. So he leased his bulls to Painted Pony to supplement his work as a dairy-cow hoof-trimmer, a trade he'd inherited from his dad, who died when Shawn was 16.

Painted Pony owners Shawn and Shana Graham with their kids, Gabby, Trevor and Lexi. Contestants from across the country come to Lake Luzerne to compete in tie-down and team-roping (see pages 40-41), bareback and saddle bronc-riding, steer-wrestling, barrel- and breakaway-racing, and bull-riding.



Shana grew up on a thoroughbred farm in Warrensburg, rode her first horse at age three and, later, became a formidable barrel-racer. As a teenager she worked at the local ranches, including as a bartender at Painted Pony. (Those were “wild” days, she laughs. Beer bottles and chairs flew, “people hung from chandeliers.” It’s not like that now, she emphasizes.)

In 2001 Jack McCue, then-owner of Painted Pony, was ready to move on, further fueled by losing the ranch’s bar, which had burned to the ground. “Jack wanted Shawn to have the place,” says Shana. “It was Shawn’s dream.” He bought Painted Pony, and the next year he and Shana—who had been longtime friends—started dating. That summer they opened the rodeo with a new saloon. Two years later they were married.

Today Shawn and Shana Graham, 47 and 40, respectively, and their kids—Gabby, 11; Lexi, nine; and Trevor, seven—live on the Painted Pony property, as do Shawn’s aunt and uncle and Shana’s parents (her mom, Pam Morin, is Lake Luzerne’s town historian). The extended family, says Shana, is “instrumental in helping with our kids, in supporting our way of life.” Even Shana’s dad, Bob, hauls “Big Bob”—a 3-D Painted Pony “bullboard”—around town in summer, advertising the rodeo. The Grahams work constantly, keeping a schedule that’s steadily expanding, producing some 90 rodeo

Painted Pony has welcomed families since the 1940s, but the rodeo started in 1953, after Don “Wild Horse” Baxter brought wild horses from Montana to the southeastern Adirondacks. Today, from Fourth of July weekend through Labor Day, visitors get a taste of barbecue, championship rodeo and the “Western lifestyle.” Facing page: Bareback bronc-riding. Contestants compete for cash and enough points to propel them to finals.

os up and down the East Coast—including their Fourth of July weekend through Labor Day season in Lake Luzerne that can draw 1,000 people a night. And then there are the animals, 265 in all, that require tremendous care—“They’re our rock stars, our livelihood,” says Shana.

The Grahams breathe rodeo. Shana swipes through photos on her phone: Decorations from a Western-themed wedding she hosted at the Longhorn Saloon. Gabby in a cowboy hat, leaning on a fence. Shana plays a video of Trevor at rodeo camp, getting thrown from a bucking calf. (“He got on three that day!”) She finds a shot of Lexi with buckles and trophies. (Lexi and Gabby barrel-race; they’re “becoming lightning bolts,” says Shana. They’ll soon join the New York State High School Rodeo Association for kids, grade six and up, to compete and celebrate the lifestyle—there’s even a rodeo prom. Starting them at a young age, says Shana, “raises contestants, it keeps the cowboys growing, it keeps this alive.”)

Shana shows several photos of adorable wobbly-legged foals, part of Shawn’s new breeding program. His bucking stock has been selected to go to the Wrangler National Finals and last year a bull was selected to go to the Professional Bull Riding Finals—both in Vegas and both top honors in this business. Right now, she says, Shawn is in Plattsburgh, trimming hooves. “He’s the hardest worker I ever met. He worked for everything he has.”





Shawn Graham's bucking stock has been selected to go to national finals, in Las Vegas—the highest honor in the business. Facing page: "Contestants and staff are our family," says Shana Graham. "We couldn't do what we do without them." Some of the cowboys and cowgirls are generations deep in the world of championship rodeo.

Someday their children will take over Painted Pony, Shana says, her eyes tearing up. "It's what they want. The Western heritage, it's in you. It doesn't matter where you are. It's about what you wake up dreaming about."

OFF TO THE SIDE of Painted Pony's grandstand as evening falls, Shana's brother, Sean Morin, lounges in a patch of grass as his boys, ages three and eight, tumble about like Western-clad bear cubs. They've grown up around this, explains Morin, just as he, Shana, Shawn and the rest of their family did. "There's value in this," he says. "It's a healthy hobby for the younger generation, and gets them away from their Xboxes and cell phones."

Just watching the rodeo's side acts is distraction enough—the clown conducting the audience to the chorus of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline"; an announcer's comment that coaxing a stubborn calf from the arena is "like trying to pull my wife outta Walmart!" But during

the main events, under the bright lights, with the rush of racing bodies cutting the air, the rhythm of hooves, the whoops and clapping and adrenaline, it really does feel like you're somewhere else, far from what lies beyond Painted Pony's gates.

When it's all over, Shana, her daughters and son line up and say goodbye, shake hands and thank visitors for coming.

"I see the kids leaving with hats and trick ropes ... little ones passed out on their parents' shoulders," says Shana. "Some say, 'I've never seen stuff like that! I want to be a cowboy or a cowgirl!'"

That's what this is. We're keeping alive the Western way of life ... a different way of life. ▲

IF YOU GO

Painted Pony hosts its championship rodeo in Lake Luzerne Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, July 1st through Labor Day weekend. For tickets and a schedule of events—including Painted Pony's summer appearances at Stony Creek Ranch Resort—see www.paintedponyrodeo.com, Painted Pony's Facebook page or call (518) 696-2421.