



# Hey, Y'all, Watch This!

Local Competition Brings Out The Redneck In Everyone

**C**old beer. Wide-brimmed hat. Sense of abandon. Billowing flags of red, white and blue and the Confederate Southern cross. These are the symbols of the modern American redneck. Symbols of shirtless freedom, of swagger, of liberation from any streamlined city accents. Redneck means ...

"Like ... someone that's in the backwoods," says Annette Smith, a 45-year-old Centralia brunette. "Anything goes, yeah. Shotgun." She giggles. "Cowboy boots, big belt buckle! Uh-huh. Harley riders, bandanas and leathers."

A couple hundred of these self-proclaimed rednecks gathered in June at the first Missouri Redneck Games at Midway, just west of Columbia. Driving up to the games, it's hard to escape

the countless signs and the surplus of exclamation points.

#### *Redneck Games! Entrance ahead!*

Visitors are greeted on the approach to Midway by the sight of a plastic Miller Lite tower shadowing a countrified stage, a couple cows and a vehicle still digging out of the mud pit. Miller signs are everywhere.

It's high noon ... let the games begin.

**ANNETTE SMITH** watches her husband, David. The 42-year-old, grizzled man grips a toilet seat with a swastika-tattooed hand and stares at a pole a few feet ahead of him. The naked woman tattooed on his arm, he says, is a phoenix. He wears a white bandana and sunglasses.

"My husband's about to get beat by a kid!" Annette cries with a giggle. The

competition demands that David and the other contestants toss the toilet seats around the poles.

Annette wonders aloud why there aren't more people here. She got here from Centralia at noon and that's when they said the games would start. It is already after 2 and still there are so few people.

Annette resigns herself to helping the wedding party. The happy couple will take the stage at 7. Clear 99, a country radio station, helped throw that one together: a real-deal redneck wedding.

**FLASHING EYES** and a bright, ready smile distinguish Joe Bechtold's tan face and hint at deeper charm and nuance, a man who knows what's what. His stride rolls with calm confidence, almost urbane. His cowboy hat is classic.



Bechtold manages Midway Expo Center, and the Redneck Games event is his baby. He knew Atlanta held them a dozen years ago and attracted 5,000 folks to its first set of games. Missouri was prime to follow suit.

Maybe it would be a loss the first year. Who cares? Bechtold wrangled all the support he could. He approached Clear 99's Uncle Scotty after the country radio personality did a comedy set at *Déjà Vu*. He secured the help of Missouri Wedding Connections and Miller Lite. Now Joe's crew of boys is racing everywhere to manage traffic and supplies. He just got off the phone, ordering food for a band playing later — some hot dogs and chicken sandwiches.

Bechtold calls out to a group of his guys. "Hey Mike, let me get something straight. Guys come here. Am I paying all of you?"

A flurry of voices rings out: "No, he's working with Joe." "I'm working with Bob." "I'm just helpin' out, man!" "I appreciate it," Bechtold says.

HEAT SIZZLES and energy pops by midday. The first of the Redneck Games are done. No more toilet seat tossin', no more seed spittin'. Next up: the mud pit belly flop and bobbin' for pigs' feet.

Children start crawling into the mud pit after 2. It must be at least 5 by 15 feet of oozing, slimy sludge. An odor not unlike manure drifts up. Mmmm.

Crowds gather to stare as the young folk dive for the glistening mud. Two middle-aged women lock eyes. Everyone ponders.

"My shoes aren't the best for this. I'll go in if you go in!" one laughs. Yelps and hollering buzz all around.

Kids are somersaulting onto the mud piles. They're leaping in. The sound of tractors whirrs in the background — the hay bale obstacle course is going on across the field.

A 19-year-old country giant named Nick Thompson lounges in the mud pool. Even Uncle Scotty commented on his height during the seed spittin' contest:

"I don't say this to a lot of people, but Nick's a big boy. Nothing wrong with it,

dude." Nick is 6-foot-8 and wears the red skin and big belt buckle with natural country flair as he competes in virtually every contest.

He and his family throw mud at each other. The mud hits him right where it hurts.

"THE MUD TRACKS..." says cake decorator Edith Hall, "that was somewhat their idea because he does mudding."

Her eyes dance around her creation, the grand wedding cake with its Miller Lite cans serving as supports for the tiers and Miller bottles dressed as bride and groom at the top. A toy truck is perched in the icing, and chocolate mud tracks run along the side. Hall has decorated wedding cakes for 26 years, but this is her most unusual assignment.

"Mudding? What's that?" asks young blonde Lucie Kocum. She is a post-doctoral Canadian studying social psychology at the University of Missouri. The idea of the Redneck Games fascinated her so much that she biked an hour and a half from Columbia to get here.



Photo By Edith Hall

"What is it?" Hall repeats. "It's when you jump in a truck and you go out in a muddy field in your pick-up truck and let the mud fly." Edith draws out the final words.

"Oh, just for fun?"

"Just for fun! And you usually have the trucks—"

"So that's why there were those dirty trucks outside..."

"Yeah. That's mudding."

"Mudding."

"HEY, THAT WATER isn't the same level!" a woman in the bleachers crows. "We need more water in number three! That's not fair." Even after Joe Bechtold dutifully appears and adds water, she cries, "That still ain't enough!"

The crowds are staring down at three plastic tubs full of water and hunks of meat — white pigs' feet with pinkish toes. The goal of the competition is for these people to bite the feet with their teeth and drop 'em into the metal buckets.

"Next we need Nick and Tony," Uncle Scotty announces. "These guys have been fighting all day."

The crowd is going wild. Screams and crows.

De Oakley is 52 and wearing a yellow *Vive Cuervo* shirt. Water flies from her hair in a shiny flash of sun as she grabs the pigs' feet. The moment is epic and raw.

"You're going to short out the microphone!" exclaims Uncle Scotty.

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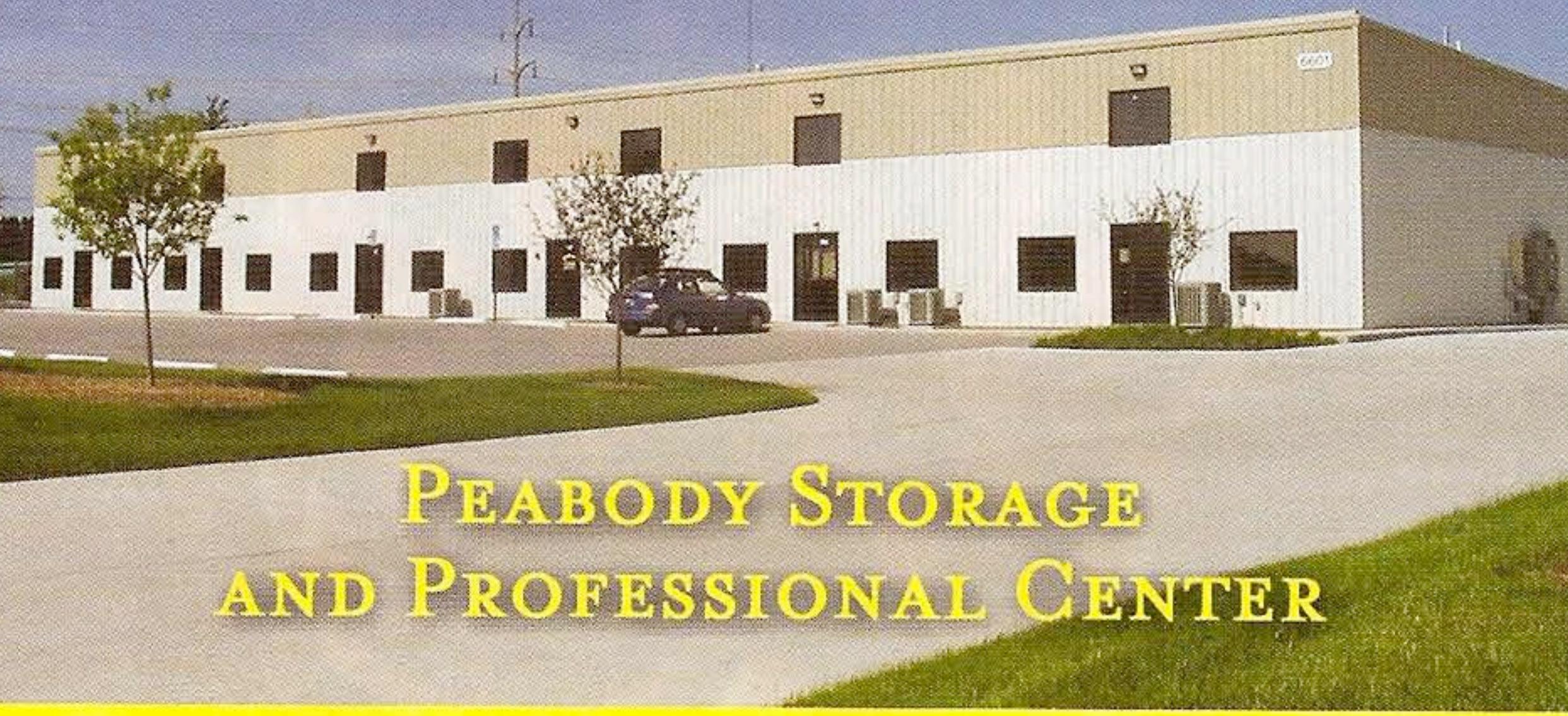
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“FUN?” Edith Hall considers her cake. “Uhhhh, yeah, it was fun.” Her voice lacks enthusiasm. “It didn’t take a lot of time but that’s OK, you know?”

“Some friends of mine are professional cake designers,” Canadian Kocum says.

The two still stand in the wedding tent. In front of it two pitchforks intertwine to form a heart around which a toilet seat with red, white and blue flowers hangs. A sign announces “No Shirt, No Shoes, No Problem.” Family members, the ring-bearer dogs and a duck named Waddle Waddle mill idly about the tent.

“Do you know how many males would like this?” Kocum gestures to the Miller cake. “Do you know how many males would get married if they could have a cake like this? Lots.” She laughs loudly though Hall stays silent.

“I should charge them extra for all those little flowers, those shotgun flowers. Those are extra — I spent as much time on that as the actual cake.”

The redneck wedding couple’s parents walk around wearing special mother-of-the-bride and Git-R-Done T-shirts, the former purchased at the mall. The black-shirted reverend, Bryce Atkins of “I Do” Wedding Ceremonies, chats. A child wanders over and points.

“Is that a real cake?” the kid asks.

“Yes, it’s a real cake and no, you can’t poke it,” Hall says.

THE REDNECK GAMES is offering awards for each competition, calling the victors to stand on old containers and a tire. They receive a wooden plaque with a crushed Miller can and the achievements on it.

David Smith examines his horseshoe competition plaque. "I got a Harley bathroom in my house," he says to the people around him.

"Second place went to Nick!" Uncle Scotty announces.

"You get another plaque. That makes him extra redneck. Oh, and the plumber's crack and Daisy Dukes competition will be at 8 o'clock this evening."

"...FOR ALWAYS DOING THINGS the way she wants, attending to her honey-do list before she gives you the Git-R-Done look" — the crowd screams with joy and approval — "to be faithful to her until your dying days, please say I do."

The wedding crowd hangs on Rev. Bryce Atkins' every word under the setting sun. They surround the Miller Lite tower on the band stage where the couple and the reverend stand. The air is still warm with summer and charged with wedding frenzy. Both bride and groom wear jeans and white shirts.

"And Teresa, do you take Ryan to be your lawfully wedded husband? Will you show him love by checking him for ticks when he comes out of the woods? By letting him watch the game without disturbing him with a honey-do list? By being faithful ..."

The crowd goes wild.

"And now a reading from I Corinthians...."

A hay wagon has delivered the couple to the stage and now they gaze into each other's eyes as they read their vows.

"Now Ryan and Teresa want to express their love in a very special and unique way," Bryce says. "By sharing their first beer together as a married couple!"

A boot-shaped drink of Miller Lite appears on stage and Teresa seizes it in her hands. She chugs the beer until it's gone.

"The boot! The boot!" the crowd shouts.

"I don't even know what that means, friends!" exclaims Atkins. "Ryan and Teresa, may your marriage bring you all the hootin' and hollerin' a marriage should bring. You have made your redneck vows to each other. I now pronounce you husband and wife! Kiss the bride!"

The newlyweds make out on stage for five minutes. Teresa holds a flapping duck during the Funky Chicken song. Everyone cheers. ■

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