

Wayne County Fair History

In the fall of 1849, some citizens of Palmyra, New York decided to hold a horse racing competition and display of agricultural products for their area and surrounding towns in Hathaway's grove. Little is written about what took place after that first fair until 1856. On April 13, 1856, seventeen men organized themselves as The Palmyra Union Agricultural Society and filed corporation papers; they held a three-day fair in October that year.

*From the secretary's minutes:
Union Agricultural Society at Palmyra
April 13, 1856*

*President: Martin Butterfield
V.Pres.: Stephen Hyde, William H. Feller, Russell Stoddard
Secreatry: Carlton H. Rogers
Treasurer: Joseph C. Lovett
Directors: Luther Sandford, Stephen R. Williams, Theron G. Yeomans,
David Gates, William H. Rogers, Jacob C. Pettit
"Whose duty it sahl be to manage the property and concerns of the
said society as will best promote the interest of Agiculture, Horticulture and
the Mechanic Arts"*

The Society became a stock company in 1868. selling 341 shares of stock with a par value of \$15.00 each. Currently, there are only about 200 shares accounted for.

From Palmyra Union Agrl. Society Record of Shares

*Original Stock Issued - Certif. #
1 - Lovett, Jos. C.
2 - Doran, Wm.
3 - Johnson, C. D.
4 - Sanford, D. P.
5 - Cuyler, Geo. W.
6 - Johnson, N. P.
7 - Parker, Sorenzo
9 - Taber, Silas
10 - Cook, Geo.
12 - Crandall, A. P.
14 - McSouth, Thos.
15 - Robinson, Lewis
18 - Hyde, C. T.*

The original 18 plus acres on Jackson Street, at that time on the southern outskirts of the village of Palmyra, was leased to hold the annual fair. In 1863, The Palmyra Union Agricultural Society purchased it for \$6,000. Today's assessed value of the property is over \$1,000,000.

As other "Fairs" of the time and area came and went, the "Palmyra Fair" flourished, adding new buildings from profits year to year. The Fair Building, known today as Floral Hall, was erected in 1856 and still is used today; many reapiers & modifications have been made over the years, but Floral Hall is the only builing still remaining since that time. 1875 fair records show a plus balance of \$211.93.

*From the secretary's minutes:
Union Agricultural Society at Palmyra
April 15, 1898*

Decided to extend the main building 32 feet to the north, run it up 2 stories and run the roof east and west. Add 16 feet on the north end of the Dining Hall and move the offices 65 feet further north.

This is the current configuration of Floral Hall - 2 story building, the north end roof running east to west; small office buildings just off Jackson St. at entrance to fairgrounds; the Dining Hall used to be on the site of the current 4-H building [to east of entrance/Floral Hall.

In 1913, the ideal weather supported a record attendance of about 16,000 visitors. 1922 was the first year that the fair was open at nighttime. The fair allocated funding to light the grounds. The major attraction in 1922 was the stunt flying of WWI pilot Captain Basil Rowe and a 19-year old female sky jumper named Ruth Blackman.

During the 1930' s and 1940' s, the Palmyra Fair was known as one of the best County Fairs in New York State. Harness racing was the main attraction bringing many horsemen from the area to compete on the Fair's fine racetrack. During World War II, Fair officials were successful because of the close promotion of agriculture. The national theme was "FOOD FIGHTS FOR FREEDOM".

The Fair made room for exhibits from Future Farmers of America chapters and 4-H clubs with no entry fees charged in the 1940' s. 4-H continues to exhibit annually without an entry fee.

Horse racing was always a major theme at the fairs since its inception.

From the secretary's minutes:

Union Agricultural Society at Palmyra

Feb. 6, 1895 - Annual Meeting

...build a grandstand to seat 500 people. Next annual fair: Sept. 26, 27, 28, 1895.

Dec. 21, 1921

...The Board of Directors agreed to have the grandstand enlarged, the horse barn moved to the west and south of the grandstand, that a supplementary track be made if deemed wise and that the sheds in the rear of the property be moved if found desirable...

May 3, 1922

... grandstand be extended 48 feet to the north; horsebarn used for race horses be extended on the south to double current capacity; the horse barns on north side of the grounds be removed beginning with those on the west end and to the east side of the Mertz driveway... [cost est. \$3582.50].

The 1950 Fair hosted the first Applesauce Derby, a horse race sponsored by the New York State Canners and Freezers. Spectators filled the grandstand for ten consecutive years to see this famous race. The Wayne County Fair was the site of a historic covered grandstand. Horses were stalled under the grandstand. On January 4, 1964, a devastating fire burned it to the ground, also destroying many horses. The Fair Board replaced the grandstand with metal bleachers that seated 1200 people. Additional bleachers have been added over the years making the seating capacity over 2100 seats.

The fair has not been without detrimental problems. In the spring of 1962, for numerous reasons, the fair nearly dissolved. After several years of declining gate receipts, the Directors announced that there would be no fair that year. Several organizations met with the fair's Board of Directors and with reorganizing and volunteer help. the fair went on. The 1962 Fair was named the People's Fair and then renamed The Wayne County Fair.

In 1963, the Wayne County Board of Supervisors agreed to support the youth activities taking place at the fair and assisting in financing the Fair. That practice continues annually today. The Agricultural and New York State Horse Breeding Development Fund became a law in 1965. Funds became available to county fairs to use for repairs and capital construction related to agriculture. The Wayne County Fair has participated in the program every year.

Instead of renting tents to house commercial exhibits, the Fair purchased a 40'x 60' steel building in 1976, Commercial Bldg. 1. In 1977, a 99-year lease was executed between the Palmyra Union Agricultural Society and the Village of Palmyra to construct a Community Center and baseball diamond. The Palmyra Community Center is used by the Fair Board to hold monthly meetings. Another steel building was added in 1980, Commercial Bldg. 2. New restrooms were built in 1981 and the old 4-H building was demolished. An additional restroom was built in 1986. The Marion Sr. Booth replaced their food booth with a modern building in May 1987.

Three New York State Governors (Dewey, Harriman and Pataki) have visited the fair over the years. Numerous other dignitaries have also visited the Fair throughout the years including Congressman Frank Horton, Congressman Bill Walsh. Senator Paul Kehoe, Senator Nozzolio and local favorite, Assemblyman Bob Oaks.

The Fair Queen was called the Miss Palmyra Fair, Wayne County 4-H Fair Queen and today Wayne County Fair Queen. The annual pageant is sponsored by over 75 businesses in Wayne County and is the largest participating pageant in the county. The Queen, Princess and courts promote agriculture and reign over the Fair during the week.

The Wayne County Fair means so many different things to many people. The annual fair is a place for families to meet old friends and make new ones. The Fair hosts over 100 commercial exhibitors and hundreds of fair exhibitors who compete in various 4-H, agricultural, and domestic competitions. The fair showcases Wayne County's best craftsmen, animals, vegetables, and plants. Entertainment Alley showcases a variety of entertainment for all ages. The vast mid-way provides thrilling rides and games for young and old. Numerous food vendors provide a variety of meal options and there is currently a Wine Tasting event that couples local wineries and farm markets to edify fairgoers.

The Wayne County Fair continues to be profitable and successful because of the diverse Board of Directors and volunteers from the Advisory Board, 4-H, Grange, Fire Departments and local and state law enforcement. Various businesses sponsor events and activities at the fair. Their support allows the Fair to bring a variety of entertainment and activities for the entire family. The Fair continues to be one of the oldest fairs in New York State. Annual attendance averages 16,000 for the 6-day event.