

Wayne County Fair History - A Brief Summary by Pamela Ferranti, Vice President [2005]

The history of the Wayne County Fair starts in the fall of 1849, when some citizens of Palmyra, NY decided to hold a fair in Hathaway's grove. Little is written what took place after that first fair until 1856. On June 26, 1856, seventeen men organized themselves as the Palmyra Union Agricultural Society, and held a three-day fair that October. During the same year, the society became a stock company and continues to remain so today.

The original 18+ acres on Jackson Street was leased to hold the annual fair. The Palmyra Union Agricultural Society purchased it for \$6,000 in 1863. Today's assessed value of the property is over \$979,000. 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.

As other "Fairs" of the time and area came and went, the "Palmyra Fair" flourished, adding new buildings from profits year to year. The 1875 fair records show a plus balance of \$211.93.

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.

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.

In the spring of 1962, for numerous reasons, the fair almost folded. After several years of declining gate receipts, the Directors announced that there would be no fair that year. Several organizations met with the Fair Board of Directors and with reorganizing and volunteer help, the fair went on. The 1962 Fair was named the People's Fair and renamed The Wayne County Fair.

The Wayne County Fair was the site of a historic covered grandstand. On January 4, 1964, a devastating fire burned it to the ground. 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 1900 seats.

In 1963, the Wayne County Fair Board of Supervisors agreed to support the youth activities taking place at the fair and assisting in financing the Fair. – A practice that 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.

August 1970 found the fairgrounds used as the site of the Old Fiddlers Picnic with about 7,000 attending, but in 1980 the picnic was moved to a new location due to low attendance and the high cost of insurance.

Instead of renting tents to house commercial exhibits, the Fair purchased a 40'x 60' steel building in 1976. Another steel building was added in 1980. New restrooms were built in 1981, the same year that the old 4-H building was demolished.

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 Community Center is used to hold monthly Fair Board meetings.

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 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. Fair goers will see a variety of animal and domestic exhibits. Entertainment Alley houses a variety of entertainment for all ages. The vast mid-way provides thrilling rides and games for young and old. The numerous food vendors provide a variety of meal options.

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.

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