

EARLY FAIRS AROUND WAYNE COUNTY

How did fairs come to be in the new settlements of the Genesee country? One of Charles Williamson's best ideas for this area was a "county fair." Williamson was a land agent for Pulteney Estate, of which most of Wayne County was a part. He was from England where fairs had been held since medieval times.

The first reported fair was held in Geneva, Ontario County; in 1807 (Wayne County was not set-off from Ontario until 1823.) Exhibited for sale at this fair were, "...*fat and lean cattle, hogs, sheep, horses, wheat and other grains.*"

Beginning in 1818, New York State began providing funds for premiums at fairs. At this time Ontario received \$1000.00 for agricultural and manufacturing premiums. It is interesting to note that there were no '*domestic*' classes as we now know them.

The first '*agricultural society*' in the area was organized in February 1818, with Myron Holley of Lyons, NY as vice-president.

In Canandaigua on October 18, 1818 the first fair as we know them was held. Cattle, sheep and swine were shown with a plowing match being held. In November 1819, a '*domestic manufacturing fair*' provided opportunity for women to participate and some did win.

An "*Agricultural Ball*" was part of the second fair in 1820. At this time, premiums for the "Best Cultivated Farms" were presented: Asa Smith, Palmyra and William Loomis, Sodus each received \$10.00 for their efforts!

Even though Wayne County was established in 1823, settlers continued to participate in the Ontario County venture for several years. At the annual meetings, a couple of toasts reflected the era. "*More draining of lands, less draining of bottles.*" Farmers need "*good tools, strong teams, neat farms and smart wives.*"

In 1830, an exhibition of flowers, fruits and vegetables was held at the Lyons Hotel, Lyons, NY. With that event several locals took interest, the Wayne County Agricultural Society was formed. This society held fairs in Lyons, Newark, Palmyra and Rose Valley. In 1853 mention is made of a "...*show and plowing match at Mr. Ford's north of Lyons....*" This was held in January, not the optimal time for a plowing contest! Officers for this event were: Fletcher Williams, president; J.D. Ford, treasurer; D.O. VanSlyck, corresponding secretary; E. Ware Sylvester, recording secretary. This society permanently located the fair in Lyons in 1854. These fairs had proved financially successful with surpluses after paying the premiums.

Afterward, permanently locating in Lyons, a new society was formed and received this surplus. D.C. VanSlyck was elected president in May 1855 of this new society. Many people became 'life members.' The citizens of Lyons raised \$1700.00 and eleven acres of land was purchased east of the present Rt. 14 and north of the Clyde River (Village and Little League fields are currently located there.) The grounds were spacious with many trees providing shade and water was close. A main hall of 56 by 80 feet was erected with a horse track nearby. The main hall burned in 1867 and was quickly rebuilt. However, a second fire, around 1911, was a death knell for the society, which disbanded shortly thereafter.

A poster from 1862 sheds light on the rural life of that era. The fair was in Lyons on October 9 & 10 with the following premiums listed: horses, sheep, swine, cattle, agricultural implements, wheeled vehicles and harness, fruits, dairy, domestic manufacture, stoves, painting/pictures, and clothing. There was no charge for entries. The officers in 1862 were listed as: President – S.B. Gavitt; Vice-President – H.G. Dickerson; Secretary – H.P. Knowles and Treasurer – W.D. Perrine. Directors listed were: E.N. Thomas, J. Bradley, J.D. Westfall, H. Graham, Jr., H.J. Leach and F.T. Palmer.

In 1911, the following societies were active in Wayne County: Newark Fair Association, organized in 1893; Union Agricultural at Palmyra, organized in 1856; Wayne County Agricultural Society, organized in 1837. The Newark Fair was held in the area of the present Driving Park on the northwest side of the village. Palmyra Fair was always held on the present site (W. Jackson St.) with Floral Hall as the main building.

As times changed, fairs ceased for various reasons, usually financial. However, the "Wayne County Fair" continues to be presented annually. "A TRADITION SINCE 1856" - it is held the second full week in August at the fairgrounds on W. Jackson St. in Palmyra, NY and presented by the Union Agricultural Society at Palmyra, which, without the many volunteers that donate hours of hard work, this fair would not occur!

Bibliography & Resources:

- History of Wayne County; Everts, Ensign & Everts, Philadelphia, 1877
- Wayne County Looking Back; 1980, 2004
- Report of the New York State Agricultural Society; 1911
- Wayne County Historical Society.