

144 years of History

In the long, tried and found true history of Darke County there never has been nor likely ever will be an entity that has drawn the abiding attention of so many people, residents and non-residents alike, as that August augmentation, Fair Week.

It all began in 1853 when Franklin Pierce served as the 14th president of the United States of America and has lived, breathed and prospered through the terms of no less than 28 heads of the state.

The history of the Great Darke County Fair, very soon to see its 142nd merry-go-round, is much too deep, far too wide ranging to be totally covered in these humble lines. Yet by the same token, by selecting certain segments, one can visualize what could be called a great event.

And, by the same token, when the fair hits its sesquicentennial 150th year in 2006, surely there will be more true stories, more progress, more excitement, and more of the ongoing anticipation of Fair Week that has long since become part and parcel of local life.

A Beginning

Other counties in the area were doing it and many others were planning and it was in the latter planing category that Darke County spawned its first agricultural exposition in the late summer of 1852 when better than a score of people gather in the second edition courthouse in Greenville to say in no uncertain terms, "We want a fair of our own."

Dr. I.N. Gard was named chief executive officer and ably lead such men as George Coover, Alfred Kitchen and Noah Arnold to realize that dream. And so it came to pass that on a Wednesday and Thursday, September 7 and 8 of 1853, Darke indeed had a fair of its own.

Greenville, as the county seat, was selected for geographic reasons and thus the initial fair was held on the former Annie Oakley Festival grounds immediately east of Garst museum.

The Darke County Agricultural Society expanded to over 300 members and the fair itself prospered. For the first five years it remained on the present day museum grounds, then moved in 1858 to today's Oakwood and Oak Street area

in southwest Greenville adjacent to the Brethren Home where one can still see a partial outline of the harness racing track in the street curvature.

Then came 1870

By the time the 16th fair moved into view, the third and final grounds move was made when, in 1870, today's fairgrounds was established...not as large nor as busy as today to be sure, but moved then none the less.

It is remarkable that only three times since its inception has there been no fair held. These will be discussed later in these lines.

But the fair itself rapidly established itself not only as a ways and means to exhibit livestock and crop bounties, but as a much needed respite to troubles and cares, a beneficial rest stop along the highways of life.

In the decades of the Darke County Fair, the United States has been involved in no less than seven wars in which over 642,000 men and women lost their lives to battle deaths, a number of them from Darke County. The county went through the zesty Roaring Twenties and into abyss of the Great Depression. Yet the fair was always there as its own unique pressure release valve. And also shall it be.

Landmark Fairs

For illustrative purposes one can devote lines to the fairs of 100, 75, 50 and 25 years ago, thereby bringing to light one means of seeing how life itself has progressed.

We begin the journey in 1898, already the 43rd fair, now moved back from its September Song of the earliest days to the familiar August run. It was to be a five-day event, Monday through Friday, the 22nd to the 26th. And by the time the whole she bang was in the books, it was estimated by the fair board president J.M. Brown that 28,000 people had been in attendance.

A highlight was the "Famous Professor Hannon" and his miraculous balloon ascensions and breath-stopping parachute leaps to the huge gray grandstand. The midway was very small, but the farm related exhibits were, for that time very encompassing. People drove their horse drawn buggies and wagons right onto the grounds and made a full day of it, bringing bulging baskets of chicken fried in an iron skillet and covered with grandmother's red and white checkered

cloth, crockery containers of true lemonade, a veritable Alps of homemade potato salad, acres of homemade apple and cherry pies...and all the trimmings.

People vied for space under the sheltering giant oaks, laid out their tablecloths and shooed away black ants. Children hooted and cavorted, adults visited, compared life notes and discussed the fall harvest. By the time the sun sank over the prairie land to the west, it was homeward bound, there to reach by dark.

Premiums for exhibits were very modest by today's rates, such as fifty cents for glove cases or a fancy whisk broom (won by Lillie Bunger) in the "Ornamental Work" category.

Harness racing had a then-hefty total purse of \$2,200 and single admission to the grounds was a quarter dollar with family ducats at one dollar.

Downtown Greenville where "everyone did their Friday-Saturday trading" was itself a bustling spot, fortified by the Mozart store operated by Eikenberry and Christopher (where it seemed everyone had worked at one time or another). Limbert and Hand's dry goods at Third and Broadway, Emrick's drug store where you could purchase a gallon of machine oil for twenty-five cents or a bottle of Scott's Emulsifier (if you were experiencing tiredness but didn't need to be oiled).

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75 Years Ago

The 1923 edition, the fair's 68th, hold even higher promises for things to do, to see and to hear about.

Taking place August 20-24, the fair added some new wrinkles such as three stakes races, boys livestock judging contest, Girls Canning Club work and something curiously called the Ohio Ten Litter Club.

The Arcanum High band performed as did the Greenville American Legion post musicians. The Civic League operated a first aid tent and on Soldier's (now Veterans Day), then current and former people in uniform marched in parade format from Memorial Hall to the fairgrounds.

Business leader and horse owner Tom Billingsley had entered one of his steeds named Glendill in the speed program while S. F. Ludy went with his horse, a filly (we think) named Ruth Axworthy.

Freda Rismiller captured blue ribbon and a free trip to Columbus for her canning exhibit, while Joe Magato was awarded a top spot and \$5 for his Poland China boar.

Ohio's Warren G. Harding was president as the fair plans jelled but he was to die in San Francisco that August 2 under, some still feel were somewhat mysterious circumstances.

But all in all, it was another in an endless skein of ever-successful fairs and Darke County looked to the turning of leaves and the opening of another school term.

On to 1948

A great deal had happened in the country by the time the 93rd fair week rolled around in late August of 1948, not the least of which was that breathing space between World War Two and the Korean Conflict.

And this was to be a break year because no fair would be held in '49.

Premiums for exhibitors amounted to over \$30,000 and fair board secretary Frank Heistand said included was \$14,000 for the speed program's purses over their five day run.

Ohio governor Thomas J. Herbert was in attendance along with his wife. Although he didn't speak he just enjoyed (one can hopefully assume).

There was \$2,300 in Junior Fair premiums too and the Wednesday and Thursday horse team pulling contests grew in popularity.

For grandstand entertainment, then getting a solid foothold, the fair board had acquired the services of the Duke of Paducah and Bradley Kincaid, popular radio entertainers in the country-western category. "Lucky Lotto" brought in his auto thrill show and a three ring circus that called itself "Sawdust and Spangles" was also on hand. Add to that the Cleveland "Marching Marjorettes" who performed some of their Cleveland Browns football game routines.

As always, especially in those days, Greenville and the county communities went dark during the fair week...businesses and offices closed up tightly and all simply went to the fair. Some still do.

Election Day saw five fair board members retain their office: Irvin Bankson., Art Barga, Jess Ross, Dewey Hanes and Charlie York. Friday's gate receipts amounted to \$7,518.25 and it was said the total week's income was to be a new record of nearly \$70,000.

Then 1973

A quarter century ago, 1973, saw the fair's 117th running huge, expressly when mirrored with the 100th, 75th, and the 50th. It was eight nights with a load of icing on the colorful cake including the famed Dr. H.M. Parshall Memorial Futurities harness racing for pacers and trotters.

Fair Board Chief Frank Stebbins was joined in office by his right hand man (and future president himself) Doyle Greenhoff, horseman Lowell Lehman as treasurer with the venerable Dr. Dan Martin serving as secretary.

There was an international Circus before the big grandstand for Sunday afternoon and evening performances, a demolition derby Friday evening, the all-county worship service, tons of harness racing, the big livestock and equipment parade, the 4-H activities and Junior Fair enticements, both of which had grown in popularity since 1948. Uncle Jack and Aunt Kay were very popular with the young and not so young along the midways as they twisted balloons into all manner of animal shapes, told jokes and patted hundreds of little heads, rang their Swiss bells and tolled their clanging cow bells. The former vaudevillians were to be around for many Darke fairs.

But like all good things, the week came to an end and already plans were firmly laid for '74...and years beyond. And that's still the case.

The Missing Fairs

Three times since the fair's 1853 inception has there been no event...three and only three.

In 1862 and 1863 the fair was cancelled because the county was embroiled in pitting brother against brother in the Civil War. The Ohio Volunteer Infantry had taken so many to Shiloh and Bull Run, Vicksburg and Gettysburg that

frankly, there just wasn't enough manpower to either operate or attend a county fair. And that was that. Patriotism also prevailed and board chief William Garner announced, "no fairs."

Then, for 84 consecutive years, the Great Darke County Fair held forth...until 1949. The disease was called by three names: Poliomyelitis, infantile paralysis...and polio. At first medical science (and a modicum of popular belief) felt that polio, a disease that feasted mainly on the young causing paralysis and sometimes death, was borne by houseflies. Communities, including those in Darke County liberally sprayed DDT (now banned) in the evening hours and kept their children close to home. Those in power banned public gatherings, including church services and funerals, movies, shopping and more.

By 1949 the county of Darke closed its swimming pools and shuttered its meetings. The city and county health departments issued dire and truthful warnings. City health chief Dr. Maurice Kane met with the fair board who left it in his hands whether or not to hold a fair. It was "not."

So many local families were affected by polio, either at home or through a friend, neighbor or church fellow. Every week that terrible summer of '49 there were more and more reported local cases.

The Jim Light family is a prime example. First nine-year old son Bobby contracted the dreaded disease, then his six-year old brother Johnny.

By August 1, Darke had recorded 21 cases and Dr. Kane, 17 days prior to the fair's announced opening, turned wisely enough, thumbs down. By then there were 22 county polio cases.

Greenville mayor "Red" Randall and his administration did all they could to help, a feeling certainly echoed throughout the county, the Miami Valley, the state...and the nation.

By the morning of August 12, there were 28 local polio victims and the public gathering restrictions went on. But there was daylight ahead.

Officials began to ease-off August 18, first allowing church services then as time went on, other activities. But restrictions on those under age 19 were to remain past the crucial two-week span. All in all, the county polio case load peaked at 33.

By the summer of 1950 board president Charlie York, who the year previous had to task of calling a halt to the fair, knew the county needed a shot in the arm badly and so went full-bore into reopening the fair.

Today's younger people cannot be expected to feel the sheer terror and uneasiness felt in those late 1940's when polio so disagreeably ruled. But even now some of its local victims remain as evidence of the terrible swath it cut. So sadly, the Sabin and Salk preventatives for the disease were then too many years into the future.

Some Statistics

The office of secretary is certainly a key one for the Darke County Agricultural Society's board of directors. Many have held that office and two of them in more modern times have distinguished themselves through their longevity.

The late Dr. Dan Martin, Greenville optometrist, hold this office for a record 23 years, from accountant Robert Brumbaugh. Secretary Lowell E. Dill was in office for 17 years, having begun in 1982 following Martin. Retired Marine, Kerry Martin, assumed the duties in November of 1998. Current Secretary/Manager Daryl Riffle took over the position on August 1, 2005.

Auto parts supply dealer Charles York, always resplendent with his cigar, was the top man in office 11 years, 1941 through 1951 as was amiable dairy farmer C. Luther Cox who also hold forth 11 terms, 1962-1972.

A.J. Read was president nine years (1932-40), while four others were in that chair for six terms; Doyle Greenhoff, John Townsend, Thomas McCowan and M. L. Weisenbarger.

Other offices such as vice president and treasurer have held numerous repeat holders such as Ed Buchy, Gene North and Darryl Mehaffie as vice president and as treasurer Charlie Sackett., Jim Zumbrink, Lowell Lehman and Frank Stebbins to name a few.

And Onward

Regardless of who is in office, what attractions are offered, how hot the weather might be, how good old Great Darke County Fair just seems to steam along with only national emergencies to dent the boiler of that long, long train.

People in general come to the fair to be entertained in one manner or another... through the speed program, the undeniable bounty of food and beverage, the livestock and Junior Fair, the gazebo attractions, the judging, the horseshoe pitching, the rides, the religious aspect...really, very few come with but one item in mind. It's all taken in one way or another.

The main grandstand entertainment has grown in popularity and, case in point, the Darke Fair was the first county fair to have the talents of Barbara Mandrell, straight from her having been named Entertainer of the Year. Quite a coup. Truth be stated, she's been to this fair twice. And there are many more stellar attractions that could be recalled.

In 1999, Director, Larry Foureman, introduced the fair medallion to be commissioned in a series of eight leading up to its sesquicentennial 150th year in 2006. The medallion featured the Gazebo in 1999 and in 2000 will silhouette the Grandstand. Only 500 of these coins will be minted each year.

But all said and done, what makes this fair special is what really puts the "Great" in Great Darke County Fair...the people. This means from the ticket taker to the board president, from the ride operator the person that sells balls at the Kewpie doll game...from the people who nightly spruce up the grounds, from the perspiring and dedicated board members, to the harness racing drivers and trainers from the snow cons lady to the waffle guy one who could fill pages of tributes.

The greatest of them all, however, is when the gates are at long last thrown open to one and all to children of all ages. And that's exactly what we all are.

In 2008, a new restroom and shower facility was built at the north-west corner of the property (Martz Street & State Route 121). Other capital improvements that were completed in 2008 were: paving the existing handicapped parking lot and also doubling its size with a gravel base at Gate # 6; taking out the original seats and floor of the Grandstand built in 1910 and replacing these items with aluminum and hard plastic materials. That same year, an all-time Gate revenue record of \$377,800.00 was set.

The Gate revenue record established in 2008 was exceeded in 2009, with the new mark being set at \$380,080.00.

2010 commemorated the 100th anniversary of the construction of the Grandstand that was built by the Toledo Bridge Company in 1910 at a cost of \$15,000.00. To celebrate this event a lighted, roman numeral faced clock was

purchased and permanently mounted on the east (midway) side of the structure. The wooden entry gates at the center of the Grandstand were replaced with an all aluminum structure equipped with hinges and rollers to make the opening and closing of the gate system very easy. The Domestic Arts (west) Building that also housed the Darke County Horseshoe Club from November to April annually was razed and a new 45' by 75' structure was built with cooperation from the Horseshoe Club. This new building included men's and women's restrooms. The Gate revenue record was exceeded again. The new record was established at \$391,820.00.

In 2011, the Ohio Center, formerly the WDRK Pavilion, was renovated. This renovation totally enclosed the existing structure. Also included in the project were a new roof, metal exterior siding, insulated interior walls, metal interior walls and ceiling, new entry walk-in doors, two overhead doors, twelve new interior overhead strip lights, two exit/emergency light combinations with remote weather proof heads, one emergency light and new 110 volt receptacles.

For 2012, the Board unanimously voted to approve expending approximately \$45,000.00 to retrofit and/or replace 1,034 lights in 37 buildings. The total project cost was close to \$60,000.00 but using a local energy provider rebate program, 50% of the materials were paid for, reducing the cost for this capital improvement by approximately \$15,000.00. The 156th Fair established new records for attendance (206,067), gate & ticket receipts (\$537,685.00) and livestock sales (\$406,020.00).

2013 Capital Improvements included camping electrical upgrades and northend expansions to the west side of the racetrack that totaled \$248,073.69; the Fine Arts Building had a new concrete floor installed at a cost of \$16,491.83; the Sheep Barn had a concrete floor installed at a cost of \$56,799.08 with \$39,750.00 being raised by the Sheep Committee; some racetrack chain link fence was replaced at cost of \$14,360.00 with the Darke County Harness Horsemen donating \$3,500.00; the area at Gate # 2 was repaved and some other smaller areas were repaired at a cost of \$43,519.06 with Wayne Healthcare sharing 44% of the cost of the project.

The 157th Great Darke County Fair set a new attendance record, a new Gate/Ticket Sales record and a new Livestock Sale record. The previous attendance record of 206,067 was set in 2012. The 2013 Fair attendance was 214,446. The previous Gate/Ticket Sales record of \$393,745.00 was set in 2012. 2013 Fair Gate receipts totaled \$419,675.00. The 2013 Great Darke County Fair Livestock auction set a new record. In 2012, 431 lots were auctioned off for \$406,020.00. In 2013, 437 lots were auctioned off for

\$447,430.00. The harness racing trotting record set in 2002 by Primetime Ranger (trained and driven by Jerry Landess and owned by Jon Tanner of Winchester, Indiana) in the time of 2:00 flat for the mile was broken Friday afternoon, August 23, 2013.

The horse named Moveman established the new Darke County Fair trotting track record, trotting the mile in 1:59 flat. Moveman was driven by Brandon Bates and owned and trained by Marie Howard of Monroe, Indiana. The harness racing pacing record also last set in 2002 by Prince Sheldon N (driven by Jimmy Whisman, owned by Greg Luther of Tampa, Florida, trained by John Robinson who was the caretaker at that time of the Darke County Fairgrounds) in the time of 1:54 and 4/5ths for the mile was broken Friday evening, August 23, 2013. The horse named Take It Back Terry established the new Darke County Fair pace track record, pacing the mile in 1:53 and 3/5ths. Take It Back Terry was trained by Ron Burke, currently the leading trainer in North America, and was driven by North America's all time winningest driver, Dave Palone. Take It Back Terry is owned by the Ron Burke Stable, Weaver Brusceci, LLC., Lawrence Karr, and Phillip Collura. The 2013 Fair racing schedule also saw Jack Daily lead the meet with 17 wins as a driver, also a Darke County Fair record.