

## A History of the Ohio State Fair

The first Ohio State Fair was held on the site of Camp Washington about two and a half miles from what was then the center of Cincinnati, on the Miami Canal. The listings of premiums and regulations for the first annual Fair shows the dates for this event to be the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of September 1850, however, it was postponed until the first week in October.

An Agricultural convention was held in Columbus, June 25 and 26, 1845 in which friends of Agriculture from all sections of the State participated. One of the results of this gathering was the organization of a Board of Agriculture whose object was to encourage, promote and aid an exhibition of farm products at county and district gatherings. This was largely due to the influence of M. B. Bateham, Michael L. Sullivant, and Samuel Medary of Columbus and Franklin County.

The Ohio legislature passed an act February 27, 1846, which created and set up an official State Board of Agriculture consisting of 53 members. On February 8, 1847, the law was amended and the number of members was reduced to ten. December 6, 1848, the Board met in Columbus and resolved to hold a State Fair in the ensuing September. A committee was appointed to receive propositions as to location but owing to the subsequent outbreak of Asiatic Cholera the action was recalled and the first Ohio State Fair did not take place until October 2, 3, and 4, 1850.

Those serving on the State Board of Agriculture at the time for the first State Fair in 1850 were: M.L. Sullivant, President, of Columbus, Ohio; Samuel Medary, Treasurer, of Columbus, Ohio; M. B. Bateham, Secretary, of Columbus, Ohio; Darius Lapham of Cincinnati, Ohio; F. R. Elliot of Cleveland, Ohio; Jacob T Pugsley of Fayette County; Arthur Watts of Ross County; J. M. Edwards of Mahoning County; Cornelius Springer of Muskingum County; and J. G. Gest of Greene County.

Prior to the first Ohio State Fair, District Fairs were held in various places throughout the state; the first such event being held in Wilmington, Ohio on October 20-21, 1847. The second district fair was held at Xenia, September 20-21, 1848. Plans were well under way for the first State Fair in 1849, when the Board cancelled all plans and preparations because many cities and communities reported an epidemic of Asiatic Cholera. At a meeting of the State Board in June, 1850, it was agreed that a State Fair would be held that year.

Direct transportation facilities were available from the Capital of the State to within a short distance of the fairgrounds through the efforts of Alfred Kelley, President of the Columbus to Xenia railroad, and Jeremiah Morrow, President of the first railroad out of Cincinnati to Xenia. Fair visitors were allowed reduced rates and all animals and articles for exhibition were transported free of charge. Animals and articles for exhibition were received until 12:00 o'clock noon the first day of the Fair, after which they were judged. They were then put on general exhibition to the public for two days. A price of twenty cents was charged for each single admission to the grounds. Over the grounds were several booths for selling refreshments in addition to the fine exhibits.

The Ohio Cultivator, an agricultural magazine, published at Columbus by M. B. Bateham, Secretary of the Board, had the following to say: "The beauty and fitness of the grounds and the liberal and convenient arrangements of the committee were commended by all. The spectacle presented to the beholder during the height of the Fair was very grand and animating. The spacious inclosure with its grassy slopes and inviting shade trees, its numerous tents and booths with waving flags and streamers, the throngs of

cheerful spectators; the countless carriages, omnibuses, and canal boats, all moving and swarming with people; the prancing of horses and lines of stately cattle; all combined to produce an effect on the minds of the spectators not easily forgotten by such as never before attended an exhibition of this kind." To editor Bateham should go great credit for his editorial column which was the most influential factor in promoting the idea of holding a State Fair.

When the first State Fair was held, Michael L. Sullivant, President of the Board, was the largest and most prosperous farmer and stock raiser in Franklin County, perhaps the entire State, and received several awards on his fine livestock. For the best cow over three years old, "Patsy", he received a premium of \$15.00. For the best heifer, "Jenny Lind", he received a premium of \$5.00. For the best jack "Tigertail", Mr. Sullivant received an award of \$10.00 and for the best pair of mules he received an award of \$10.00. Other livestock exhibited by Mr. Sullivant included one yearling heifer, "Dahlia 2<sup>nd</sup>", one yearling heifer, "Jessica", one cow, "Young Lady Bet", one Dorking hen and chickens, and one English rabbit.

Mr. F. R. Elliott, proprietor of the Lake Erie Nursery, Cleveland, had charge of decorating and arranging the floral display. Mr. Elliott also exhibited a display of 57 varieties of pears, each variety carrying a name, for which he received a silver medal.

Another of the original members of the first State Board of Agriculture who contributed much to the success of the first State Fair was Mr. Darius Lapham, a canal engineer and practical farmer. He served as the first State Fair Manager and his task was well under way when he was fatally stricken with the Asiatic Cholera and died before the opening of the Fair. He was held in high esteem by the friends of agriculture and the work he performed toward the promotion of the first State Fair, without compensation, exceeded that of any other member of the Board.

Machinery exhibits at the first Fair included a corn cultivator, invented by James Ferguson of Franklin County. This was a cultivator to be pulled by one horse between the rows of corn. It was made with steel teeth set in a wooden frame and had two wooden handles which would be held for guiding by a man following the cultivator. Other pieces of machinery included the "Hussey" reaping machine for cutting grain. The reaper merely cut the grain and left it laying on the ground as the machine was pulled around the field by horses, this being an improvement over the former method of cutting the grain by man power with a scythe.

Although the Board reported a small deficit, the first Ohio State Fair was considered a pronounced success. Between twenty-five and thirty thousand people had traveled from varying distances to view and exhibit in what was to become the great institution we have today.

Following the holding of the first State Fair at Cincinnati, it was held in several cities throughout the State. This was done for the convenience of exhibitors and visitors, as roads were poor and traveling was slow and laborious. The big show was held in Columbus in 1851, then in Cleveland, 1852; Dayton, 1853; Newark, 1854; Columbus, 1855; Cleveland, 1856; Cincinnati, 1857; Sandusky, 1858; Zanesville, 1859; Dayton, 1860 and 1861; Cleveland 1862 and 1863; Columbus 1864 and 1865; Dayton, 1866 and 1867; Toledo, 1868 and 1869; Springfield, 1870 and 1871; Mansfield, 1872 and 1873.

From 1874 until 1866, the Fair was held on the grounds of the Franklin County Agricultural Society in what is now known as Franklin Park. It became permanently established in 1886 on the present grounds

at Columbus, Ohio, at which time the original tract contained 115 acres which has since been increased to approximately 370 acres.

One of the outstanding influences in the dynamic development of the present Ohio State Fair is a gigantic Junior Fair with its broad program for the youth of Ohio. (The first agricultural exhibit for young people was held at Ashley, in Delaware County, in 1924). The youth organization departments which include 4-H Clubs, Future Farmers of America, Home Economics and Future Homemakers of America, Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of U.S.A., Camp Fire Girls, Vocational Trade and Industrial Arts, Farm Bureau Youth Councils, Junior and Youth Grangers, Junior Achievement and Youth Gardens, Junior Science Exhibits, Business and Office Education and Manpower Training, now provide opportunities for members of the various organizations to exhibit and participate with other youth on a statewide level.

The State Board of Agriculture, composed of twelve members, six Democrats and six Republicans, continued to have jurisdiction over the State Fair, acting in an advisory capacity to the State Fair Manager, who was responsible to the Director of Agriculture until 1961 when legislation was passed creating a new governing body. The Fair is now under the jurisdiction of this new group known as the Ohio Expositions Commission.

This Commission is composed of eleven members, nine of whom are appointed by the Governor, with the advice and consent of the Senate, and the Director of Agriculture and Director of Development serve as ex-officio members. Of the eleven members not more than five may be from one political party. Expiration of terms of appointment is staggered so there will be some continuity to the Commission at all times. The Commission is specifically charged with the responsibility of conducting at least one fair annually and maintaining and managing property held by the State for the purpose of conducting fairs and exhibits.

Broadening of programs, free entertainment, the construction of new north-south interstate super highway, making easy access to the grounds for people from all directions, plus a capital improvement program including rehabilitation of the Coliseum, the new Lausche Youth Exhibits Building, new Cooper Livestock Judging Arena, rehabilitation of the Dairy Cattle Barn, new Highway Exhibits Building, new Cox Fine Arts Center, new Multi-purpose Building, three new TV Buildings, a new Electric Exhibits Building, rehabilitation of the Grandstand, several new restrooms, blacktopping of all streets and roadways, mercury vapor lighting throughout the grounds, the new Sky Glider, which provides (North-South) overhead transportation, has helped the Ohio State Fair grow into the second largest Fair in the nation.

Attendance at the Ohio State Fair now numbers 2,053,971. Its great exhibits of livestock, poultry and horticulture; its magnificent works of art and needlecraft; machinery and industrial displays; adult and youth exhibits; its thrilling and exciting midway, Horse Pulling and Tractor Pulling Contests, all speak favorably for the great industrial and agricultural development in the state since the time of the first State Fair.

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