

The History of The Martin County Fair

Part I – The Early Years

The Martin County Fair, considered by many to be one of the finest county fairs in the state of Minnesota, has evolved from humble beginnings in the mid 1800's up to its 150th year in 2015. The following is a brief chronological account of how the Martin County Fair has progressed over the years based on archives in the Pioneer Museum. The emphasis of this writing includes the early years and the period of time when the fair moved to its present site on Bixby Road. However, readers should keep in mind that historical documentation at times presents conflicting information, as will be noted later in this article.

The first Martin County Fair was held in 1865 at the first Martin County Courthouse. That courthouse was built at a cost of \$200.00 and was located in the general vicinity of the current courthouse. An eye witness account was provided by Mrs. Kate Sperry who was quoted in the September 29, 1916, edition of *The Sentinel* as follows: "I attended the fair in the fall of 1865. It was held in the old one-room courthouse on the grounds where the present courthouse stands. About all there were in the way of exhibits were in a few pumpkins and cabbages and a cow got loose and ate up part of the cabbages."

The second fair, held in 1866, was staged at the current site of Presentation College. The attendance was described as meager as were the exhibits and races that were held on First Street. Apparently, until 1869 the fair was conducted without any real organizational standards. However, that changed in November of that year when the Martin County Agricultural Society was organized and became responsible for planning and implementing the fair from that point forward.

A contrasting view of these early fairs was held by Albert L. Ward. His perspective was printed in his newspaper, *The Independent*, and depicted a contrasting account of the early years of the fair. According to Ward, fairs held prior to 1870 were presumed to be "Fairmont Fairs," and were merely forerunners to the Martin County Fair. Ward, the first Secretary of the Martin County Fair, asserts that there were no accurate records of fairs held prior to 1870. Ward agrees that the first agricultural fair was held in the Martin County Courthouse, but stated that it took place in 1870, not 1865. He said that this fair included a trotting race held on Winnebago Avenue that had "many entries of all kinds of nags hitched to decrepit sulkies, two wheeled carts or any other sort of vehicle that was reasonably light." The winner was an old mare with a suckling colt, much to the chagrin and riotous protests of losing entrants crying foul. A. L. Ward believed Tom Allen to be the winner of this first big horse race in Fairmont, however, J. T. Swearingen

believed E. S. Snow to be the winner. With neither an instant replay nor an appeal process available at that time, the decision regarding the winner was questionable at best.

Ward agrees that the second fair was held on the current site of Presentation College; however, his account of exhibits differs markedly from the previous account. He states that the stock exhibited consisted of a cow with a “freakishly crooked horn” that had grown that way since breaking it in trying to throw a rider. In addition, Ward stated that he encountered a “bellicose” woman who had taken a prize on a quilt at the first fair and insisted on entering it again in the second fair. Nonetheless, the secretary prevailed, much to the dismay of the lady, steadfastly upholding the rules of the society.

Perhaps the most spectacular event of the second fair, according to Ward, was a free-for-all-fight. It involved a well known old settler that was knocked down so hard that the top of his head was the first part of his anatomy to hit the ground. The fight caused a great deal of excitement in creating what was at that time described as a “splendid county fair.”

According to yet another source, the third county fair was held in downtown Fairmont on twenty-four acres of land purchased at a cost of \$600.00.

The fair of 1884 involved a number of interesting events, one of which was a 100 yard foot race. Entrants were blindfolded, and they used wheel-barrows. First place was a prize of \$3.00, and second place was \$2.00. Regarding the safety of the fairgrounds, a night watchman was on duty to protect the exhibits and a “good police force” was in attendance. Also, no “promiscuous driving” was allowed on the track in the afternoon until the close of races.

The fair of 1896 was successful despite rainy conditions. Some interesting “Facts of The Fair” are as follows: Saturday’s attendance was estimated to be 3,000; as usual, Judge Livermore had the largest variety of apples comprising fifteen different kinds; Wm. Suter’s big watermelon weighing forty-seven pounds was an eye-opener; Fred Houseman’s freak sheep, thought by some to be a new breed, was a corker; as well as many other accounts mentioned in the September 18, 1896, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*.

Some events from the 1904 Martin County Fair included the Taggert family of acrobats and Professor Burton’s high diving dog. Also, Treasurer Sharpe did not have the usual struggle with privileges, as he simply turned down the “fakirs” and “grafters,” those who at that time would take advantage of fairgoers. Regarding that issue, the following was

stated in the September 16, 1904, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*: “There was not a game or fakir of any description on the fair grounds and if any man lost his money it was because he was so foolish as to bet on the races.”

The 1911 fair was plagued with rainy weather that was said to have caused losses in the “thousands,” although Friday’s receipts of that year amounted to nearly \$100.00 more than the corresponding Friday of 1910. The receipts for that day were as follows:

- Annual membership tickets: \$111.00
- General admission: \$729.00
- Children: \$ 59.45
- Carriages: \$ 13.75
- Grandstand: \$ 21.25
- Privileges: \$ 85.50

The “privileges” referred to previously correspond to concession sales today.

The most popular feature of the 1911 fair was the “old settlers” headquarters. This was where pioneers registered, met, and exchanged stories about the experiences they’ve encountered over the years.

Another interesting event from 1911 featured an “Aviation Meet.” The event was to feature an airship that was to make three ascents of at least 200 feet. The aviator planned to make two short flights and one longer flight. The stage was set for a thrilling experience; however, the 500 spectators got some unexpected results. First of all, the aviator and airship failed to arrive on time. He said his train was late. Once at the fairgrounds, the aviator succeeded in climbing only to about seventy-five feet before crashing in a cornfield about half a mile from the fairgrounds. This was far from the “thrilling” event expected by the disgusted spectators.

In May of 1911 the fair board advertised all of the “old buildings” on the grounds for sale to the highest bidder. The only exception was the stables for the race horses. In that same year the fair board awarded a contract for new barns to the Fairmont Cement Stone Mfg. Company at a cost of \$3,776.00.

The fair of 1912 provided what is claimed to be the very first car-pedestrian accident. The driver of the automobile was proceeding slowly when a pedestrian, attempting to dodge another vehicle, ran into and was knocked unconscious by the automobile. The victim received medical attention and was able to board a train for home that evening. Apparently, no lawsuits followed the incident.

The year 1914 was considered a banner year for the fair as the grounds were to be lighted with electricity. This was provided by Frank E. Wade of the Fairmont Machine Company in exchange for him being allowed to erect a "large and suitable" exhibit building in which he could display products from his company. The agreement included Wade's right of exclusive use of the fair grounds on July 4th and two other dates throughout the year yet to be determined.

Part II – The Later Years

In 1949, John Livermore headed the movement toward a "Free Gate Fair." Although unsuccessful in his first attempts, he continued his intent to "clean out the deadwood," as he put it, on the fair board. Newspaper accounts indicate that after the changeover to a "Free Gate Fair," attendance and participation greatly improved.

The fair of 1952 was highlighted with a talent show won by baritone voiced Gene Bullard that was viewed by 700 spectators. His prize was \$75.00. However, the highlight of that fair might well have been the winner of the Grand Champion Corn Exhibit. The winner, Mrs. John Grathwohl, beat out 155 other contestants. The fair board and the chamber wrestled with what to do with the King Korn Days reception and crowning the winner. Would she be crowned Korn King, or Korn Queen?

In 1955 the major plans included building a hog barn and floral hall. The fair board met and heard a proposal from John Livermore, secretary, and Ernest Kettner, vice president, that would provide funding for the project. Livermore said that he and Kettner met with the county commissioners proposing a plan to rent the livestock hall to the county for storage of its equipment when the fair was not running. He said the county would rent the building for \$200.00 annually for ten years and pay the total rent in advance thereby allowing the fair board to proceed with their plans. In addition, the board planned to send at least four of its members to the Fair Short Course in Minneapolis to prepare for a bigger and better fair in 1955.

The fair of 1957 featured a grandstand wrestling event headlining the Russian Kalmikoff Brothers squaring off against George and Angus Scott. Not to be outdone, a women's match pitted Betty Hawkins against Shirley Strimple, the national TV champion, in a thirty minute, one-fall match.

In 1964 plans were being made for a new location for the 1965 fair, which would also be the Centennial of the Martin County Fair. The fairgrounds at that time was located at the current site of Five Lakes Centre and was put up for sale. That site was purchased

in 1877 for \$500.00. In 1878, four additional acres were purchased there at a cost of \$100.00. That location served the Martin County Fair until 1965.

With the exception of the Articles of Incorporation and a somewhat sketchy record of bylaws and amendments to the bylaws, records of the society from the early days were vague at best. An interesting aspect under the Articles of Incorporation encountered when the old fairgrounds were to be sold stated that “stockholders – whether living or dead, had to be in the majority before sale of the grounds could be affected.” Registered notice of the election was sent to all stockholders of record. Nearly 200 letters came back marked “deceased” or “address unknown.” The 200 were in the majority and counted as “no” votes. Obviously something must have been done to circumvent this obstacle as the land was eventually sold to Madsen Enterprises, Inc. for \$275,000.00 in 1964 after months of searches by attorneys and engineers in finally authorizing a legal title to the grounds. The new location of the fairgrounds would be on Bixby Road on the west edge of Fairmont.

In 1965 the investment for a new location came to fruition. The new grandstand and race track were acclaimed as being among the finest in southern Minnesota and northern Iowa. In 1966 and 1967, some of the improvements included adding water and sewer lines, heating some buildings, preparing buildings for the spring Builders and Sportsmen’s shows, and a variety of other smaller projects. The grandstand was enhanced with the addition of 2,500 seats from a section of Metropolitan Stadium in Minneapolis that was being remodeled. This gave a total seating capacity at that time of 7,500.

Thus, the second century of “Minnesota’s Other Big Fair,” the Martin County Fair, got underway in 1965. Since the first fair, whichever account you choose to believe, it has flourished and featured a wide range of attractions as well as big-name entertainers up to and including its Sesquicentennial year of 2015. We’ll see you at the fair from August 17-23, 2015.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



1912
Martin
County
Fairgrounds

1926 Exhibits





Martin County Fair
Last year of Racing = Sep-1944

1950 Midway scene
Martin County free gate Fair.



100th County Fair Opens In New Site



THE DIAGRAM ABOVE IS AN AERIAL PHOTO OF THE NEW FAIRGROUNDS. COURTESY OF FAIRMONT FLYING SERVICE

THE FAIR PROGRAM

WEDNESDAY *August 19, 1965*

Entry Day - No Evening Entertainment - No Admission

THURSDAY

Judging all Day
Carnival for Kids
8 p.m. - Demolition Derby

SATURDAY

Judging all Day
2 p.m. - Stage Extravaganza
8 p.m. - Stock Car Races

FRIDAY

9:30 a.m. - Livestock Sale
2 p.m. - Livestock Parade
8 p.m. - Tractor Contest

SUNDAY

2 p.m. - Chuck Wagon Races
8 p.m. - Stock Car Races

1865 - 1965

The 100th anniversary of the Martin County Fair saw its location change to the current site of the fair on Bixby Road on the west side of Fairmont.