

WASHINGTON COUNTY FAIR

AUGUST 4-8



Sesquicentennial >> 150 Years of Memories & Moments

LOOKING BACK TO FAIR ONE

After 2020 cancellation for COVID, Washington County Fair returns to celebrate 150 years

BY MATT DEBOW
THE GAZETTE

For around 150 years the Washington County Fair holds an annual event celebrating agriculture, livestock and promoting general merriment. This year it's coming back — after being cancelled for COVID last year — to celebrate its 150th anniversary.

Washington County Historical Society Executive Director Brent Peterson wrote an essay depicting a history of the county fair since its inception in 1871.

The fair can trace its roots back to the county's early agriculture. A Washington County Agricultural Society started in the 1850s.

"But that one died," Peterson said. "It just fizzled for some reason, and then in 1870 they regained momentum to start another ag society."

The newly formed agricultural society held the first county fair in Cottage Grove in the fall of 1871, he said. The next year the fair was held in Stillwater at the Old Parson Farm, at the corner of Orleans Street and Sixth Avenue, Peterson wrote.

"Early fairs were farmers markets like," Peterson said. "So they would bring their best crops; best beets; best root vegetables; best flowers just like you see today and they would compete for prizes. It was very much a big thing it was also a way for people to connect with each other."

For instance, a farmer from Scandia could meet up with a farmer from Denmark Township. The conversation that may have followed could have been about the best way to grow crops.

"It was really a networking



An early Washington County Fair parade in downtown Stillwater (Photos courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society)

thing that they could (use to) improve their farming," Peterson said.

At the first county fair, the Stillwater Fire Department showed off new equipment and an Afton resident brought a squash that weighed 140 pounds and a 7-year-old girl displayed a quilt she made, Peterson wrote in his essay.

After the inaugural year, the fair moved to the Lily Lake Driving Park in Stillwater. After a disagreement about how much ticket sales should be given to the driving park, the fair moved to Bass Lake (what is now Lake Elmo) in 1875 where Gov. Cushman Davis spoke.

In 1876, many St. Croix Valley baseball teams competed at the fair for a \$100 prize.

In 1877, a tornado hit the Bass Lake fairgrounds and it moved back to Lily Lake Driving Park for the years of 1877 and 1878. In 1878, Minnesota Lt. Gov. Ignatious Donnelly spoke and created a political uproar, and the fair was cancelled the next year.

"What did he say in his speech," Peterson said. "Did that lend toward the cancellation of the 1879 county fair?"

The county fair restarted in



The Washington County Fair 4-H Barn in approximately 1941. (Photos courtesy of the Washington County Historical Society)

1883 and was held in the driving park again from 1883 to 1886

From 1887 to 1904 there are no records of a county fair being held.

"It didn't happen as far as I can tell," Peterson said.

In October 1903, the Washington County Fair Association was formed, and it returned from 1905 to 1908 at the Driving Park until the fairgrounds were sold.

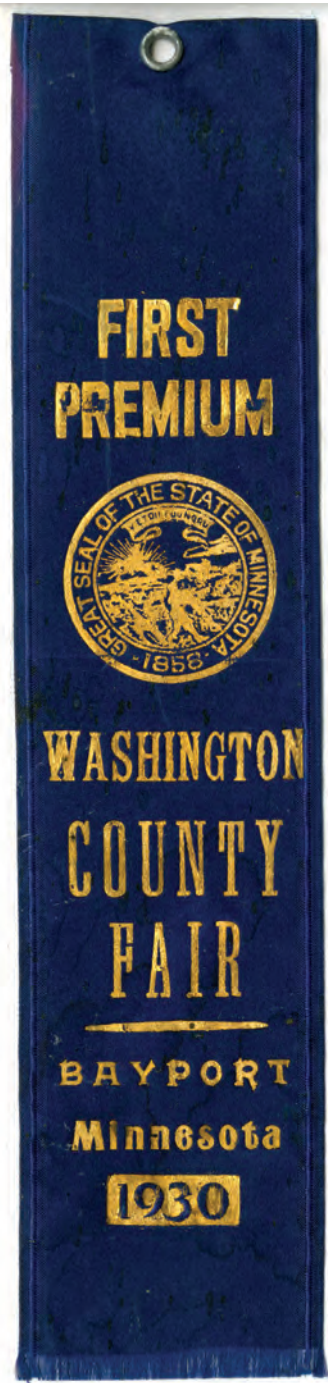
In 1913, the county fair returned and opened in Forest Lake on West Broadway near the railroad tracks for the first couple of years before moving

to downtown Stillwater in 1917 and 1918.

The fair was called off in 1919. The official reason given was a lack of suitable buildings of where to hold the fair. The fair wasn't held again until 1924 when it was held at Crocus Park in Bayport at the south end of town.

Given that time frame, Peterson speculated the event may have been called off because of the Spanish Flu epidemic.

"You kind of wonder if the pandemic then cancelled that out, but again I don't know (for sure)," Peterson said. "I not say-



ing (for certain) that's why there was no fair in 1920."

In the mid-20s, the fair started to change.

"The fair started evolving, and they started getting amusements rides," Peterson said. "So they'd have the Ferris Wheel. They'd have the little teacups. It became more of a popular event (for the greater community)."

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Pictured are the The Washington County Fairgrounds in 1975.



Former Minnesota Gov. Wendell Anderson stands by corn stocks at the Washington County Fair in the 1970s.

WASHINGTON COUNTY FAIR celebrating 150 years

FAIR

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In 1941, the fair was cancelled. When it returned in 1942 Peterson said it was focused on the war effort

“It was all bond sales, blood drives, Red Cross, and ‘support the soldiers,’” Peterson said. “It could have been some scrap metal drives as well. So those things certainly shifted during the war years. It was more about bringing the community together.”

With the war ending in 1945, the fair set a record attendance that of 10,000 fairgoers.

The fair was consistently held from 1942 until 2020 when it was cancelled last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 1970, the fair moved to its current location in Baytown Township.

Andersen windows planned on expanding and pushed the fairgrounds out.

In researching all of the fairs, Peterson wished that he could have attended an early incarnation of the Washington County Fair to see how 19th century politics worked.

“I would have loved to have gone to a fair in the 1870s because they had a lot of politicians come can and speak,” Peterson said.

Eileen Tank served as fair manager for the entire for 17 years from 1987 to 2004.

“It was just growing so fast and I was in charge of everything,” Tank said.

During her tenure, the exhibits increased immensely.

“The fair was just growing,” Tank said. “The past eight years it’s sort of leveled off. Younger people aren’t as interested in the friendly fair competition.”

Tank still enjoys seeing people bringing their best work to the fair.

“I think just seeing other people looking at the exhibits that some people do,” Tank said “They’re top notch. They worked hard on showing a nice exhibit. ... They certainly work on them all year long to have them ready for county fair.”

On Tuesday, the fair will start accepting exhibits.

There is no fee — except for the horse category. The exhibits are judged on Tuesday, and the fair opens on Wednesday and is on display for the five days of the fair.

Even though it’s a Washington County the fair draws exhibitors from neighboring counties.

“For example, we have people coming over from Wisconsin. They say ‘you have such as nice county.’ They gain more from our fair than their local fair.”

Dorie Ostertag, the Fair’s current manager and treasurer, has served on the county fair board



Kids ride a Washington County Fair Midway ride in 1973. (Photos courtesy of the Washington County Historical Society)



Washington County Fair pig races are held in 1991.



Fair goers enjoy the County Fair merry go round in 1990.



More rides, buildings and exhibits were added to the fair since the 1920s.

since 1994. She took over Tank’s manager duties in 2005.

She is looking forward to returning to an in-person fair for its 150th anniversary.

“We are having some displays of older equipment and doing a few different presentations and slides and pictures just trying to have a few things coming in,” Ostertag said.

Ostertag was intentionally a little vague on what the fair is doing for its anniversary celebration.

“You might have to come to the fair to see,” Ostertag said.

“We’re going to make it a little special this year. This is a special year all around since we didn’t have a fair last year.”

Ostertag said the county fair has all the hoopla of the Great Minnesota Get-Together — without nearly as much of a crowd.

“We’re more like a mini state fair, you can actually come near and up close to the animals and don’t have to stand as long of lines for food and rides,” Ostertag said. “If people want to stay away from that we have just about everything they have.”

Ostertag noted the fair will have a craft brew house, 35 food vendors and horse shows and a truck pull.

“There’s something for everyone to come,” Ostertag said “There’s multiple amount of things you can come out and enjoy. It’s nice to see people with smiles again because it’s been a long year.”

Even with a rise in COVID-19 cases in recent weeks, the fair is forging ahead without implementing any COVID restrictions.

“We’re planning to be back to normal,” Ostertag said on July 26. “That’s how were planning so far. We have not heard anything otherwise.”

When asked what is her fa-

vorite part of the fair, Ostertag responded she was likely the last person to ask that because she so busy managing the event.

If she truly stops to take something in, inevitably her radio will sound off requesting her attention.

“Usually I’m kind of pulled of every direction,” Ostertag said. “Someday I’m going to come to the fair and actually see something.”

Even if she can’t stop for a long time at one aspect of the fair, she does manage to get a kick out of the annual event.

“I just enjoy the excitement of people and meeting people and hearing the noise and hearing the carnival,” Ostertag said. “I get a little bit of everything.”

2021 Fair Schedule Aug. 4-8

Wednesday, Aug. 4 – Senior Day

Ms Jaz-ee Balloonologist at 11 a.m. roaming
Roger Well’s Magic, noon at the Park Pavilion
Paul Bunyan – Photo Ops from noon to 8 p.m. Near Building D at 1 p.m.

Senior Day Celebration
Johnny No Cash Band at 3:30 p.m. at Main Stage Tent
Kick Off Parade 6 p.m. at the North Track
Washington County 4H Arts-In 7 p.m. at Park Pavilion
White Bear Lake Big Band 7:30 p.m. at the Main Stage Tent

Thursday, Aug. 5 – Family Fun Day
Swine Show at 8 a.m. East of Swine Barn
ECFE Family Day 10:30 a.m. Main Stage Tent
Ms Jaz-ee – Balloonologist 11 a.m. Roaming
Fun ‘N Games 11:30 a.m. at the Main Stage Tent
Roger Well’s Magic noon at the Park Pavilion
X-Cut Sawing & Ax Throwing noon to 8 p.m. at Building D
Paul Bunyan – Photo Ops noon to 8 p.m. Near Building D
The Flyers 1:30 pm at the Main Stage Tent
Sheriff’s Dept K-9 Demo 3 p.m. at the West Pavilion
Sheriff’s Dept K-9 Demo 5 p.m. at the West Pavilion
Washington County 4H Arts-In 6 p.m. at the Park Pavilion
Mounted Patrol Demo Outback Arena 6 p.m. at the Outback Arena
Sneaky Pete’s Garden Tractor Pull 6:30 p.m. at the North Track
Washington County 4H Arts-In 7 p.m. at Park Pavilion at the grand stands.

Teen talent show 8 p.m. at Park Pavilion
Tim Sigler 8:30 p.m. at the Main Stage Tent

Friday, Aug. 6

Competitive Dairy Goat Show 8 a.m. at the Judging Arena
Competitive Beef Show 9 a.m. at the Judging Arena
Rabbit Agility Demonstration 9 a.m. at the Judging Tent
Alfy’s World of Robotic puppets 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. roaming event
Mega Jump Show-BMX Bike 11 a.m.
Ms Jaz-ee Balloonologist at 11 .m. roaming
Roger Well’s Magic noon at the Park Pavilion

Performance Goat Show noon east of the Swine Barn
X-Cut Sawing and Ax Throwing noon to 8 p.m.
Paul Bunyan – Photo Ops noon to 8 p.m.
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bikes 1 p.m.
Pony Pull 2 p.m. at North Track
The Jolly Pops, 2 p.m. at Park Pavilion
Elvis impersonator – Brad Boice 3 p.m. at Main Stage Tent
Sheriff’s Dept K-9 Demo 3 p.m. at the West Pavilion
The Jolly Pops 4 p.m. at the Park Pavilion
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bikes 4 p.m.
Sheriff’s Dept K-9 Demo 5 p.m. at the West Pavilion
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bikes 5:30 p.m.
Washington County 4H Arts-In 6 p.m. at the Park Pavilion
Draft Horse Pull 6:30 p.m. at the North Track
Riverland Truck Pull – Grandstand Event 7 p.m. at the Demo Area
Washington County 4H Arts-In 7 p.m. at the Park Pavilion
Open Talent Show 8 p.m. at the Park Pavilion
Big Fat Groove 8 p.m. at the Main Stage Tent

Saturday, Aug. 7

Bit Fat Groove 8 p.m. at the Main Stage Tent
4H Dairy Breed Show 9 a.m. at the Judging Arena
Kiddie Pedal Pull Registration 9:30 a.m. at the Main Stage Tent
Alfy’s World of Robotic puppets 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. roaming event
Ms Jaz-ee Balloonologist at 11 .m. roaming
Minute to Win It! 11:30 a.m. at the Main Stage Tent
Roger Well’s Magic noon at the Park Pavilion
Open Dairy show noon at the Judging Arena
4H Cloverbud Pet Show noon at the Judging Tent
X-Cut Sawing and Ax Throwing noon to 8 p.m. at Building D
X-Cut Sawing and Ax Throwing noon to 8 p.m.
Paul Bunyan – Photo Ops noon to 8 p.m.
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bikes 1 p.m.
Washington County 4H Arts-In Musical 1:30 p.m. at the Park Pavilion
4H Pet and Cat Show 2:30 p.m. at the Judging Tent
Washington County 4H Arts-In Musical 2:30 p.m. at the Park Pavilion

O’Shea Irish Dance 3 p.m. at the Main Stage Tent
Sheriff’s Department K-9 Demo 3 p.m. at the West Pavilion
Valley Concert Winds 4 p.m. at the Park Pavilion
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bikes 4 p.m.
O’Shea Irish Dance 5 p.m. at the Main Stage Tent
4H Livestock Auction 5 p.m. at the Judging Arena
Sheriff’s Department K-9 Demo 5 p.m. at the West Pavilion
IMP Demo Derby – Grandstand event 6 p.m. at the demo area
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bikes 6:30 p.m.
South Washington Community Band 7 p.m. at the Park Pavilion
Rockin’ Hollywoods 8:30 p.m. at the Main Stage Tent

Sunday Aug. 8

Open/4H Llama Show at 9 a.m. at the Judging Arena
Midwest Mopar Car Show – back side of the Grandstand at the Demo Area
Alfy’s World of Robotic puppets 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. roaming event
Ms Jaz-ee Balloonologist at 11 .m. roaming
Rock, Paper, Scissors 11:30 a.m. Main Stage Tent
Roger Well’s Magic, noon at the Park Pavilion
Tractor Pull Event noon at North Track
Pygmy Goat Show noon at the Demo Area
X-Cut Sawing and Ax Throwing noon to 8 p.m.
Paul Bunyan – Photo Ops noon to 8 p.m.
Premier Showmanship noon to 5 p.m. East of Swine Barn
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bike 12:30 p.m.
Autumn Serenade 1 p.m. Roaming
Washington County 4H Arts-In Musical 1:30 p.m.
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bike 1:45 p.m.
Washington County 4H Arts-In Musical 2:30 p.m.
Ballet Folklorico Mexics Azteca – MN Legacy Grant Funds 3 p.m.
Main Stage Tent
State Fair – Livestock 3 p.m. Judging Tent
Sheriff’s Department K-9 Demo 3 p.m. West Pavilion
Mega Jump Show – BMX Bike 4 p.m.
State Fair – General 5 p.m. Judging Tent
4H Awards Program 6:30 p.m. at the Main Stage Tent