

Ross County Bicentennial sparks fair nostalgia

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For many generations, families and friends have gathered at the Ross County Fair to catch up with one another and to hold a variety of contests.

But it wasn't always easy to get the fair going.

In 1821, the first county fair was held in Ross County, but interest dwindled and the fair died off. A new agricultural society was not formed until June 1833.

At the 1833 fair, contests included best axe, best barrel of flour and best piece of carpet.

Once again, the agricultural society dissolved and in 1846 an auxiliary to the State Board of Agriculture was formed.

But, finally, the Ross County Agricultural Society as we know it was formed in 1945 and they purchased the original 17 buildings at the fairground from the Youth Administration Camp for \$2,500.

And the fair has been growing ever since.

For Ed Bennett of Kingston, the fair has been a long-standing family tradition.

In 1947, his parents Evelyn and Claris Bennett began operating a fish stand next to the main entrance of the grand stand. Ed Bennett carried on the tradition for a few decades and today the third and fourth generations of the family – Nancy Wilbur and her children, Cathy and Jason Wilbur – operate it.

Bennett still plays in the Adelphi Band and before that he played in the Yellowbud Band.

"I'm 71 years old and I'm still carrying around that stupid tuba," he said. "I've enjoyed watching it grow and I've enjoyed feeding and entertaining (fairgoers) for years. It's like a big family reunion."

Other bands who played in the early days include Corcoran's and Watt's orchestras.

Fair activities included horse pulls, softball games and sporting dog shows. Admission in 1945 was \$0.25.

Besides seeing all the familiar faces at the fair, Bennett remembers the fair of 1947 particularly well.

"We had a goose drowner (rain storm) that year," he said. "I can remember watching the roof of the grand stand tent fill up

with water and then drop on people. Cars in the south end of the parking lot had water up to their windows. Farmers got their tractors and pulled the cars out but it wasn't about helping people, they were just a bunch of young bucks having a good time."

Real tractor pulls were introduced to the fair in 1954.

The 4-H horse show has always been Hershel Detty's favorite attraction. Detty has been a part of this program since 1964.

About 250 to 300 horses are shown each year at the fair and commonly six or seven go on to place at the State Fair, he said.

"Horses have always been a big item in this county," Detty, of Chillicothe, said. "I don't think it has really grown, but the competition has gotten better and the quality of horses has gone up."

Detty said events in the 4-H horse show have increased to include show opportunities for very young children. There is a stick horse competition for 5-year-olds and younger in which they get all decked out in Western duds and ride a glorified broom around the show arena. For 8-year-olds and younger, there is a lead-in competition in which the horse they ride is led by an adult on foot. And there is also an ever-popular costume class for participants of any age.

"If you went to the state fair, you wouldn't see the quality of costumes you see here," he said. "It just keeps growing. Once people get involved they keep coming back."

Participants in the Open Class horse show have increased in recent years and Detty said he believes this is because of the fine horse barn and arena that were just built.

"People bring horses out to show their friends, parents, grandparents. For some, this is their one chance of the year to show their horse," he said.

Ruth Anderson of Frankfort has served on the Women's Auxiliary for decades.

"It's more organized now and we have a lot more entries," Anderson said, adding everything from needlework to antique dishes is displayed for judging contests.

She said she has been involved in this aspect of the fair because of the "enjoyment of seeing other people and seeing people come back and visit year after year. I've made a lot of friends over the years."

Ed

Bennett