



ROSS CO. FAIR

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FAIR



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## Fair History

The Ross County Fair is rich in history and tradition and gets bigger and better with each passing year. Check out our history here, then start making plans to attend this year's fair and be a part of history in the making!

### The First Fairs

The first Ross County Fair in Ohio was held in Ross County in October of 1833. Cattle shows had been held as early as 1819. In order to launch this fair, the Agricultural Society was formed in June of 1833 with George Rennick as its president. Some of the categories at this fair included best piece of carpet, best piece of jean cloth, best set of dental instruments, best axe, best sculpture, best fancy chair and best barrel of flour.

This society expired and was succeeded by another society formed in 1846 as an auxiliary to the State Board of Agriculture. It was in 1945 that Charles Betsch organized the Ross County Agricultural Society as we know it today. It had 21 members representing each township, the City of Chillicothe, and members Ex Officio: county commissioners, county school superintendent, and county agricultural agent. These members were responsible for the purchase of the 17 original buildings of the National Youth Administration Camp for \$2,500, in a bid to the United States Treasury Department, Office of Procurement.

The grounds, encompassing 43 acres, were part of the county home farm which was under the control of the county commissioners. In August of 1944, the Ross County Picnic and Junior Fair began at the abandoned National Youth Administration grounds on State Route 104. Seventeen large buildings were available for use (this is the site of the current fair). Since this was during World War II, much of the theme of the picnic and other exhibits was war-related. Uniformed servicemen were admitted free of charge. 4-H clubs adopted names such as "Victory Gardens" to carry out the war theme. Events such as softball games, horse pulling contests and a sporting dog show were features no one wanted to miss.

Farm exhibits dominated the displays with a flower show, farm machinery and home equipment demonstrations. The healthiest boy and girl were also chosen from the Junior Fair. The champion steer brought \$17.44/hundred. Admission for these activities was: Adults - 25 cents, Children - 10 cents, under age six - free. Total attendance was 5,000 and there was considerable talk about making this an annual picnic because of the grand success of this event.

### Growing Success

By 1945, Ross County was looking forward to another great summer as the Fair board organized along with the Ladies Auxiliary. Over 500 volunteers helped make this year successful. Many state leaders looked to Ross County as a fair leader to pattern their future fairs after. Governor Lausche and John Hodson, Director of Agriculture for the State, visited this fair to examine the organized event. Attendance was 18,000 and was marred by a huge traffic jam, 3 miles long, attempting to get into the fair. Plans for a new highway and more entrance gates were on the slate of ideas for next year. Testimony to the success of this fair was the awarding of the Myers Y. Cooper Trophy as the best agricultural, industrial and commercial fair in the State of Ohio.

In 1946, the traffic jam was taken care of by new roads into the fairgrounds, as well as a road around the facility. Bleachers to seat 1,300 people were available, as were toilets. The staff dormitory was converted to a display area. City and County school exhibits started. City officials and county volunteers joined efforts this year and there were a number of events to view, not the least of which, was the winner of the hat contest that sported "The onion-headed boatsman." A 1904 Hupmobile was driven around the track to draw attention to the Sesquicentennial of Chillicothe celebration to be held in October. The 4-H band performed and there was a daily livestock parade.

Attractions in 1947 included sideshow freaks like a cat with two heads and four eyes, a two-legged pig and a four-legged chicken with two tails. Traditional exhibits were still on the grounds with the Junior Fair board making its presence known by assisting with fair activities. A hot year made it necessary for planes to taxi into the ends of the pig barns to provide a cooling breeze for the sweltering swine. All sorts of weather was apparent this year; a downpour affected the lighting system and illumination was reduced.

### New Traditions

The Sesquicentennial for the founding of Ross County was a part of the 1948 fair. The Nathaniel Massie plaque (now located on the south wall of the Courthouse) was dedicated. The new Junior Fair building that was built in the shape of an "H" was completed, and new power lines were installed for the increasing demands. Five new steel buildings were erected, but the traffic jam was still a headache for the Fair board.

Twenty concessionaires provided goodies for the 1949 fair. Due to the polio scare, many fairs were forced to shut down, but with Ross County, it was business as usual. Pari-mutuel betting was the new feature at the horse races, and farmers were encouraged to "electrify" their farms. The first pay telephone on the fairgrounds was installed.

The 1950 fair admitted school children free the first two days because of the educational value. A kindergarten area was set up where young children could be left in capable hands sponsored by the Ross County Nurses Association. A large number of animals were on display, and a Junior Fair office was established in the Junior Fair building. The HAP contest based on health, achievement, and personality was a big feature.

In 1951, the Grange Band provided entertainment along with the Adelphi Band which had provided entertainment since the fair's beginning. This fair was billed "Ohio's Greatest". The race track was upgraded to include a starter's platform.

4-H was celebrating 50 years at the 1952 Ross County Fair. Almost 500 boys and girls enrolled in the county program. "I bawling for a new barn," was the slogan of the fair at the livestock barns. There were placards placed on cattle that read "You can help build a new Junior Fair Livestock Barn." The only "slight" mishap occurred as a pilot, while dusting crops, smashed into a fence at the fairgrounds, but no one was hurt.

The 1953 fair, known as Ross County's Sesquicentennial Fair, boasted a new livestock building built by 4-H members, advisors and farmers. In 1954, weather played havoc with the fair. Heat caused the death of at least two hogs and a storm kept the Highway Department, County Garage and Federal Reformatory busy cleaning up. The tractor pulling contest was a new event this year.

The first Junior Fair Queen's contest debuted in 1955. This fair had the largest tent ever erected on a county fairgrounds in Ohio. And this fair, like others, had its weather woes. Tents were damaged in a storm on Sunday, and a second storm on Monday tore down the Big Top. For the second day in succession, the poultry and rabbit tent was upset and animals mixed up so badly that judging had to be suspended since owners were unable to identify their entries. One mammoth tent was saved from being blown down as 50 men were on hand to bear down on the poles.

Cooking was the dominant theme of the 1956 fair as the first 4-H bake-off was held at the YMCA. Cooking demonstrations and a cooking school were offered. The 1957 fair had grandstand entertainers such as a Western Horse Show, Dance and Figure Skating by the Skate-A-Way Roller Rink, the Yellowbud band and Midwestern Hayride Show. A helicopter was on the hand to give 17 minute air tours until it crashed in an attempt to take off and hit four parked cars. Fortunately, no one was hurt. The first annual horseshoe pitch was held.

The 1958 fair was traditionally the same, especially with the weather. Saturday of the fair ended in mud, but according to the treasurer, the mud was black... not red. After the devastating 1959 flood in Chillicothe and surrounding areas, everyone was looking forward to a good time at the fair. The fair saw the display of one of the largest swine shows in Ohio with over 300 head of swine. In 1960, the grandstand highlights were Dr. W.W. Anderson, world's greatest hypnotist, tractor pulling and harness racing. The new livestock show ring was ready for use and the Daughters of Union Veterans presented a new 50 star flag to the fair board.

### Snafus, New Events, and More Growth

The 1961 fair enticed visitors with unusual exhibits. There was a model of a "Moon Room" which was scientifically designed to accommodate a man after he rockets to the moon. They also sponsored a baby contest which became "heated." There was a man "buried alive" at the fairgrounds. He was hypnotized and put into a casket on Wednesday. He was to remain there for 72 hours, but he had to be dug up on Thursday because it had rained so hard that the casket was filling with water and he was in danger of drowning.

Certificates worth \$15,000 showered the crowd at the fairgrounds on Chillicothe Day. A rocket blasted off and let go of 6,959 certificates good for merchandise or attractive discounts on items carried by local merchants. However, the rocket ended up being one-half mile off target. A second rocket was put into the air with better luck. A model bomb shelter was built by the Ross County Civil Defense and was stocked with provisions and other supplies to last up to 14 days. The Junior Leaders were quite busy with their duties operating the 4-H Dairy Bar that was in the Commercial Building.

In 1962, few changes occurred with the exception of the new \$18,000 grandstand being dedicated at the horse show. Another big storm in 1963 destroyed the horse tent beyond repair. Harness racing had to be cancelled and there was a decline in attendance. William Harsha, U.S. Congressman, did visit this fair. In 1964, the camping area became known as "Tent City" because 75 units of every description were visible. Next year, water and electricity would be available to the tents. Another big storm in 1965. This time, it struck a barn and melted the ring of a bull's nose that was tied to a steel grinder. The bull was unconscious for several hours.

In 1966, most of the fair activities remained the same, and in 1967, the Ross County Clerks and Trustees had a booth at the fair and were the first to do this in Ohio. The fairs of 1969 through 1973 were equally successful. More camping units were added each year, but the county's mind seemed to be on the landing of the moon, the Manson murders, and the Vietnam War. A pet show was added, and the first woman competed in the demolition derby.

In 1974, the fair was extended to six days and showed improvements in the form of lighting, new barns, a mobile stage, and expansion of the campsite area. Politics seemed to be the theme of this fair as Senator John Glenn visited the grounds and the Ross county deputies had to escort members of the National Socialist White Peoples' Party from the fairgrounds. Their booth was open two days, but after much heckling from bystanders, they asked to be escorted out. Another political note: Nixon resigned.

The tobacco spitting contest was an addition in 1975, and in 1976, a competition for men only was the fullest beard, best goatee, and the fullest mustache. There was a "Pack the Pinto" contest in 1977, which was to see who could get the most people weighing the most number of pounds into a Pinto (automobile). Community organizations were more involved in the fair and the Ross County Fire and Rescue helped with the emergencies, vets assisted with livestock, and the grounds were cleaned by the Scioto Trail Youth Conservation Corps. At the demolition derby, there was even a wedding! Only at the Ross County Fair!

### Grandstand Appeal

The fairs of 1978 and 1979 were great ones as well. In 1980, our county fair queen, Vicki Francis, also won the title of Miss Ohio State Fair Queen. Good weather was recorded and the attendance records kept climbing upward during 1981 through 1983.

In 1984, new items at the fair included the calf scramble, a computer for the livestock sales and a day being declared as Senior Citizens Day. This year brought the first funeral to the fairgrounds as a horse named "Justin Chief" died of exhaustion and was buried in the infield of the track. The grandstand was packed in 1985 during the truck and tractor pull.

In 1986, a new fruits and vegetable and school exhibit building was in place. And yes, a girl entered and won a calf in the calf scramble. The fair of 1987 once again brought new attendance records and in 1988, the grandstand acts included a horse pull, demolition derby, 4-H night, Danger Brothers, McGuffey Lane, and the Queen's contest. More than 400 campers now lived in "Tent City" during fair week at \$60 a camping spot. This was six percent of the fair's revenue! In 1989, grandstand entertainment included Cissie Lynn, daughter of Loretta Lynn. The first year for the county king contest was 1990. Highlights in the grandstand that year were Lorrie Morgan and Mickie Gilley who gave a grand performance in front of 12,000 people.

When 1991 hosted 530 camping spots (all filled), the fair board looked into purchasing more land. The hog show lasted nine and a half hours and it took until one in the morning to sell all the market hogs. Attendance now has reached an estimated 90,000 for the week long fair. Entertainment included Shenandoah and Carlene Carter.

### Record Highs and Exciting Shows

In 1992, the fair board elected its first woman to the presidency. A record number of 2,166 entries poured into the Home Arts building. Outstanding performances were given by Lee Greenwood, Suzy Boggus, Tracy Lawrence, and Highway 101.

Mark Chestnut, Sammy Kershaw and Cactus Brothers were entertainers in 1993. The highlight was the new show arena. A new bandstand was also added to the grounds. Close to 2,000 4-H members displayed their projects. In 1994, the grandstand had Sawyer Brown, Michelle Wright, and Ricky Lynn Gregg. This was the 50th year for the Ross County Fair and a dinner to honor people who have taken part in the fair for the past 50 years was given. A commemorative stamp was made, a printed history of the fair was distributed, and a time capsule was buried, along with many other activities that took place.

A new multi-purpose building that offered a kitchen, office, restrooms, tiled floor, heat and air conditioning was built for the 1995 fair. This building is not only used during fair week but is rented almost every weekend throughout the year. Also, a new five year contract was signed by the fair's biggest nonfair rental customer, the Easyrider Rodeo. Charlie Daniels and Tracy Byrd were entertainers in the grandstand.

Aaron Tippin and Sawyer Brown were the 1996 acts in the grandstand. The fair board added a new 200 x 80 foot horse barn with stalls and show arena to the grounds. The Ross County Sheriff's Department built a new building on the grounds to use all year long for training and meetings. The fair board also rents it out. Although 56 more campsites were added, a waiting list still exists.

In 1997, Billy Ray Cyrus and Neal McCoy brought in crowds to the fair with their grandstand performances. A black top road was put around the camping area and major repair was done on the septic system. Once more, 56 more campsites were installed, making a total of 820 camping facilities. That makes "Tent City" the second largest "city" in Ross County -- next to Chillicothe -- during fair week.

Extensive update and repair was made on the grandstand in 1998, and the electric was replaced in the campgrounds to be able to handle the huge air conditioners that now accompany the large campers which roll onto the grounds. A new caretaker's manufactured home was put into place, and an EMT addition to the Sheriff's building was made for use during the fair and special events. Kenny Chesney, Confederate Railroad, and Blackhawk were the top billing in the grandstand.

Lila McCann, Ty Herndon, The Marshall Tucker Band, and The Little River Band entertained for the 1999 Fair.

The Ross County Fair promises to be even bigger and better fair, as each year the Fair board, 4-H advisors, County Extension office, Ross County Auxiliary, exhibitors and many, many volunteers strive to make the Fair the best it's ever been. Each fair in the state of Ohio is unique in its own way. When one stops to look at what is special about the Ross County Fair, one might note that the hard work and dedication of all these people. Much of the success of the Ross County Fair is due to the Junior Fair. The Junior Fair is very large with 117 4-H clubs, 438 advisors, 3,471 members which the Senior Fair board supports and recognizes as being a valuable part of this event.

The Ross County Fair has had some vibrant history, come to the Ross County Fair and be part of history in the making.

