



History of The Big Fresno Fair The Road to Becoming the State's 5th Largest Fair!

The San Joaquin Valley was a budding agricultural giant in 1882, when a group of Fresno businessmen, growers and ranchers met to form the Fresno Fair Ground Association. The first Fresno Fair opened the following year and featured a five-day horse race meet, a few small produce displays and several head of livestock. Betting was legal and mostly on an individual basis, although "pool selling" was mentioned in newspapers the next year. More attractions were introduced as early as the third year when Reuben T. Chandler, Army battalion commander in the final Indian fight near Millerton, was featured by The Expositor.

A grandstand and a \$20,000 pavilion were finished a few weeks before the 1888 Fair. Agricultural and industrial exhibit halls were erected in 1911, followed two years later by a commerce building. The Fair improvements were halted during the Depression of the 1890's, with the fairground's properties peddled at a foreclosure sale in July 1895. Fortunately, the property remained in friendly hands until it was repurchased by Fresno County in 1901 for \$30,000.

A period of change and uncertainty followed. For several years, there was not a Fair, and many "first annual" fairs were presented as different groups managed the organization. The beginning of a true tradition for the Fresno Fair was inaugurated with the hiring of Clyde Eberhart in 1910. Clyde, a man of great energy and vision, was responsible for such spectacles as the 1919 "Great Train Wreck." Under Eberhart's guidance, auto racing, Raisin Day parades featuring movie stars and aero-plane rides all helped showcase The Fresno Fair as one of the top expositions in the country.

The glory days began to fade with the end of the Raisin Day parades, after a depression hit local grape growers. Following a race car tragedy, county supervisors withheld funds and the Fresno Fair did not open in 1930. Fortunately, a group of young members of the Fresno County Junior Farm Bureau defied advice from their elders and voted in 1934 to sponsor the Fair. Exciting events were held thereafter until 1942 when the Fairgrounds was used for a WWII internment camp and later as an Army facility.

In 1948, the Fair was reborn and solidly financed under the stewardship of Tom Dodge and the 21st District Agricultural Association. From then on, The Big Fresno Fair has surged into national prominence and emerged as one of the largest traditions of its type in the country.

Fast forward to the last two decades and in 2004, the County of Fresno generously extended The Big Fresno Fair land-lease for the next 50 years, allowing the tradition to continue for future generations. Then 2009 marked an exciting landmark in The Big Fresno Fair history; the Western Fair's Association (WFA) named The Big Fresno Fair the 2009 Feature Fair, which was the first time that a California Fair has ever been selected for this honor and given the opportunity to showcase its innovative programs and vision to its peers within the industry.

Additionally, the WFA's Merrill Award, the highest honor within the Fair industry which recognizes fair programs that demonstrate outstanding vision, leadership and excellence, has been awarded to The Big Fresno Fair five times, putting the Fair in a very exclusive group of fairs who have attained such a level of accolades. The Fair received its first Merrill Award in 2007 for the Pirates in the Park attraction within Table Mountain Rancheria Park, which was part of a multi-year capital improvement project for the Fairgrounds. In 2012, the Fair received its second Merrill Award for the "Feed the Need" Food Drive held



in collaboration with The Salvation Army and Community Food Bank. The Big Fresno Fair was awarded its third Merrill Award in 2014 for the development of The Big Fresno Fair Museum and a new, documentary-style video, *Heritage Talks*. In 2017, the Fair was presented with its fourth Merrill Award for the creation of the Fresno County Historical Museum, which solidified the Fair's role in not only showcases the best of Fresno County during its annual Fair, but its rich history and heritage year-round with the Museum. Then in 2021, the Fair was presented with its fifth Merrill Award for its Joint Health & Safety Public Outreach Program with the Fresno County Department of Public Health.

Today, The Big Fresno Fair, the fourth largest fair in the State and the largest event in the Central Valley, attracts over 600,000 visitors from throughout California.

Note: Information used for "History of The Big Fresno Fair" was taken from "Windows of the Past" composed by Liz Laval.

Here is chronological list highlighting some of the events in The Big Fresno Fair's history:

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| Early 1880's | The idea of a fair came to the forefront when men of the Valley met at neighborhood gatherings or passed the time of day at one or more of the "colony" stores where provisions were brought. |
| December 21, 1882 | The Fresno District Fair was organized by a group of agricultural and business leaders. |
| December 26, 1882 | Fresno Fairgrounds Association Incorporated. |
| February 1883 | One hundred acres, located two miles east of what was then known as Fresno Colony, was purchased from Thomas E. Hughes for \$5,000. |
| October 7-11, 1884 | The First Fresno Fair was held. It ran five days and consisted mainly of a horse racing meet for trotters, a livestock department and a few small produce exhibits. |
| 1887 | California State Legislature created the 21 st District Agricultural Association. |
| 1888 | The Fresno Fair Grounds Association reincorporated. |
| 1888 | Popular Best Baby Show was held. For many years, the Valley honored its fairest babies, beginning as early as 1888. The annual Best Baby Show attracted up to several hundred entries. Physicians examined the youngsters in the Baby Pavilion, and physical and mental standards were of primary value. Babies were stripped and placed in the hands of a nurse for a doctor to determine their finer points. Winners were presented with cash prizes, sterling silver drinking cups or tiny gold rings. |
| 1889 | A new fair corporation, operating under State supervision was created. |
| June 27, 1895 | Fair properties were sold at foreclosure sale. |



- February 15, 1901 A committee was appointed to look into the feasibility of purchasing the fairgrounds by the County of Fresno. The purchase was made for \$30,000, and Fresno County became the owner of the property.
- 1904 Barney Oldfield raced on the old fair dirt track in his Peerless Green Dragon. He set a world record in a 50-mile competition at the Fairgrounds.
- December 14, 1907 The Fresno Fairgrounds were leased to the Fresno Agricultural Association for a term of five years. The annual rental to be paid was \$1,800.
- 1909 After the Legislature abolished pari-mutuel betting in 1909 and auto racing moved into the picture, local horse racing temporarily ceased in 1910.
- April 1912 Glenn L. Martin was at the controls of a 1912 vintage air machine. Martin made the nation's first air express flight leaving the Fresno Fairgrounds with a bundle of *Fresno Morning Republican* newspapers destined for the city of Madera. Twenty-four minutes after taking off, his cargo was parachuted to waiting newsboys and he began his return trip. Strong headwinds caused the aeroplane to run out of gas, and Martin glided the final three-quarters of a mile to the fairgrounds, establishing another world record; this for the longest reported glide distance without a motor.
- 1914 Schoolgirl Aviatrix thrills Fairgoers. At intermission time during the races, fans had an unexpected thrill when the nineteen-year-old Katherine Stinson Aviatrix flew passes over the Fairgrounds and then landed in front of the grandstand.
- March 30, 1932 The Chamber of Commerce was looking for ways to cut expenses and suspended the Fresno Fair. The Tulare-Fresno Fair, held in Tulare, became the only fair conducted in the Valley south of Stockton in 1932.
- 1933 The Fresno County Junior Farm Bureau staged a Fair. They were granted permission from the Board of Supervisors with the stipulation that no monetary support could be expected. Security First National Bank loaned FCJFB money to reactivate the Fresno Fair.
- August 1934 The 21st Agricultural Association entered into a five-year agreement to handle overall Fair operations. This agreement was renewed in 1939 for another five years.
- March 2, 1937 The Board of Supervisors approved a 40-year lease with the 21st District Agricultural Association for the fairgrounds.
- January 1941 The 21st Agricultural Association was forced to run its own fair as a State ordered change.



- October 5, 1941 The 1941 Fresno District Fair established its claim as the largest district fair in the United States by playing host to 146,157 persons since the gates were opened.
- Late 1941 The Fresno County Junior Fair Board (FCJFB) changed its name to Fresno District Fair Association.
- December 7, 1941 U.S. Army occupied the Fair's district office and began preparing to convert the grounds into war-time emergency facilities.
- May 11, 1942 Fairgrounds became a dispersal center for interned Japanese-Americans.
- November 9, 1942 Fresno Fairgrounds were transferred from Wartime Civil Control Administration as an agency of Western Defense Command to Fourth Air Force Technical Training Command.
- January 15, 1947 C. Todd Clark, chairman of the Board of Supervisors, nipped the ribbon, returning the fairground to Fresno County. The same day, a telegram came from the War Department canceling the return of the property. The actual takeover came three months later.
- 1948 The Fair emerged reborn and financially robust, thanks to the efforts of Manager Thomas A. Dodge and the 21st District Agriculture Association.
- September 8, 1948 Cotton Industry Display is held at the Fair. It was estimated the Cotton Dollar that came to Fresno County passed through seven hands before leaving the county again. Jobs, salaries and business income were dependent on the Cotton Dollar in many types of business off the farm. Insecticide and fertilizer dealers, equipment sales and service and farm workers got most of the Cotton Dollars directly, but government, banks, professional people, retailers and just about every type of business in Fresno County eventually touched it. This display showed fairgoers the importance of the Cotton Dollar to Fresno County.
- October 5-15, 1961 First woman livestock judge in the history of the Fresno Fair. Mrs. Alice W. Lowrie was one of California's best-known women in agriculture and was the first woman livestock judge in the history of the Fresno Fair. Mrs. Lowrie, the public affairs officer at the University of California, Davis, judged goats. A veteran in agriculture public relations for cooperatives and the Agricultural Council of California, Mrs. Lowrie also had managed her own livestock ranch in Lake County and was a highly qualified judge.
- 2020 The outbreak of COVID-19 turned the world upside down. Public events ceased to operate, which included the 250+ year-round events held on the Fairgrounds and its traditional, in-person Big Fresno Fair. Instead, the Fair pivoted to survive and held "Drive-Thru Eats" – a drive-through Big Fresno Fair experience filled with



delicious Fair food, roaming entertainers, two stages with live music and performances from local acts and virtual competitive exhibits. The Fair did manage to have a modified, in-person livestock show and sale for the hard-working 4-H and FFA students.

2021 - TODAY

The Big Fresno Fair made its return to an in-person event in 2021 – bringing the beloved tradition back for the community to enjoy. With an average attendance of 600,000 people (pre-COVID), The Big Fresno Fair ranks as the 5th largest Fair in California. The Big Fresno Fair’s management and team always strives constantly to be an industry leader and a positive reflection of the greatness of Fresno County and the greater San Joaquin Valley.

In June 2024, The Big Fresno Fair announces for the first time, it will have 14 days of live horse racing, double the number of race dates held in 2023. The 2024 Fresno race dates starts in September before the annual Fair begins. This historic race day allocation comes after the California Horse Racing Board (CHRB) approved plans by the California Authority of Racing Fairs (CARF) to create year-round racing in Northern California under the new Golden State Racing organization. This move was designed to keep live horse racing in Northern California after the closure of Golden Gate Fields on June 9, 2024.