

## **THE HISTORY OF THE BOULDER COUNTY FAIR**

Local government was centered around a county structure since the Colorado Territory formation in 1861 and it was governed by an elected Board of County Commissioners, County Judges, Sheriff, County Clerk, Treasurer, Assessor, and Justices of the Peace. Boulder and other developing communities wasted little time petitioning for separation from county governing and many became incorporated in the early 1870's.

So why was Boulder selected as the site of the first county fair?

- a) It had the largest permanent population of any area settlement - around 1,500.
- b) There was strong sentiment in the business community to add to the overall regional economy – mountains and plains. A spotlight on the town exposing its' many positive attributes was viewed as valuable promotion.
- c) There was a keen eye on the expansion of the new railroad lines into the county.
- d) Boulder was dual-purposed serving a small agricultural community as a commerce destination center, but also largely a mining supply town for the many gold mines in the mountains.
- e) There was strong interest in promoting education and even pursuing the possibility of a University.

The stated purposes of the county fair were to explore the potential of the New West, to encourage diversified endeavors, and to accumulate and share information about agriculture in this area.

The Boulder County Fair is generally accepted as the longest running county fair in Colorado. However, it is not the oldest, *continuous*, fair in the state. That honor goes to the Arkansas Valley Fair in Rocky Ford that was founded in 1878. Boulder County had a one-year hiatus of the Fair in 1946 due to a community-wide concern of a polio outbreak.

**Context:** Compared with 24/7 media news outlets today, smartphones, and the internet, what were some of the important, larger issues of the day and on the horizon in 1869 that were likely part of the conversations at the first fair?

- a) Discoveries of gold in the mountains near Gold Hill in 1859 and coal near Marshall soon thereafter, both contributed significantly to employment, the economy, and continuing public interest throughout the county.
- b) Many of the hard rock miners eagerly, and naively, made 'grubstakes' of hand tools, food, and beasts of burden investments with others in exchange for a share of their strikes. While there were several hundred mines being worked, most of the gold fever

ventures were unsuccessful. Disillusioned, the miners returned to the skills they learned back east, and that was farming. The growing population in the area created a ready market for flour, vegetables, fruit, milk, eggs, meat and livestock feed. Experimentation in more hardy crops and livestock for this high altitude had begun.

- c) The Town of Denver began holding a fair in the fall of 1866. Their fairgrounds were two miles northeast of downtown where the National Western complex & stockyards are now located. Featured were the Arts, Agriculture, Stock-raising and Industry. Nearby was a separate race-track, chartered by the Territorial Legislature.
- d) While Boulder County was the top wheat growing area of the Colorado Territory in the early 1860's, the farmers had come to the realization that diverse and productive agriculture on the dry side of the mountains needed to include a system of irrigation ditches to capture stream runoff and spread it out across the plains. The territorial legislature and Congress legalized the doctrine of prior appropriation in 1866. Spanning the width of the county from the Coal Creek drainage north to St. Vrain Creek, 122 separate water right appropriations were filed by private ditch and irrigation companies between the years of 1859 and 1869.

Over the fence conversations likely included, ...who is getting enough water and who isn't? Are there some farmers taking more water than they are entitled to? Are the streams already over-appropriated? What does the mountain snow-pack look like this year? How might we survive in dry years? What varieties of crops yield better in our climate?

- e) The new, close-knit Ryssby community west of Longmont was settled by six Swedish immigrant families in 1869. By the mid-1880's Ryssby grew to fifty families.
- f) The 1866 John Deere farm catalog was consumed by farmers. It included ads for 31 horse-drawn implements including plows, discs, harrows, planters, grain wagons and buggies.
- g) On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1869 the golden spike was driven at Promontory Summit in Utah commemorating the completion of the last section of track for the Transcontinental Railroad. It now connected east and west across the Plains from Omaha to Sacramento, CA.

While the route was north of our border in Wyoming, local business leaders and elected officials were giddy about the new opportunities for railways, telegraphs, factories and commerce as well as expanded access to markets, travel, and civilization. As envisioned by Colorado movers and shakers, a connection from the main rail line in Cheyenne to Denver was constructed within two years. A spur off of that main line west into Erie's 'Coal Park' became the first railroad into Boulder County.

- h) In the summer of 1869, a lone prospector hunting for elk in the high country west of Nederland stumbled across a rock outcropping he couldn't identify. It turned out to contain silver and started Colorado's first major silver rush. Although located at 10,000

feet in elevation, the townsite of Caribou couldn't grow fast enough. Within a couple of years, 3,000 miners and their families erected tents and houses and moved to 'the place where the wind is born'.

*(The following timeline includes a snapshot of select dates and stories from the long and varied history of the Boulder County Fair. Time did not allow for a year-by-year search of information about the fair, if indeed that information even exists in print or memory. Some side-bar notes are provided for context)*

- **FIRST Location of the County Fair – Boulder, CO**

**1869** - On June 12, 1869, a group of the county's prominent farmers, fruit growers, and stockmen gathered at the Pearl Street courthouse and organized the non-profit Boulder County Agricultural Society. With grist mills and a vibrant farming community, Boulder quickly became the top grain-growing and grain-milling county of the territory.

The Honorable Granville Berkley was elected president of the new Agricultural Society and F.A. Squires, treasurer. With its first action, the Society voted to spend \$600 to purchase 40 acres of land between 28<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Streets and south of Valmont Road in Boulder for the first fairgrounds. The baseball fields, east of the Boulder YMCA and near 30th & Mapleton, are remnants of what was the first county fairgrounds site.

The stated purposes of the fair were to explore the potential of the new West, to encourage diversified endeavors, and to accumulate and share information about agriculture in this area.

Boulder County was the first to establish a county fair in Colorado Territory. It opened for a four-day run on October 12, 1869. A pavilion was erected to display flowers, vegetables, cereal grains and hand-made items. Separate refreshment stands were positioned around the grounds. The women of Valmont opened a dining hall with the proceeds going to support the new Valmont Presbyterian Church. They netted \$250. Meanwhile the women of the Congregational Church on Pine Street also sponsored a festival of freshly harvested fruit and home-made delicacies in the basement of their church with any money raised to help finish their building.

There were horse races daily with purses from \$5 to \$15. The race track was just east of 28<sup>th</sup> Street. An 8-piece band from Denver was on hand to provide the music for the events.

There were five classes of exhibits on display, for which the winners received prizes from \$1 – \$5, plus a “diploma”:

- Class A – Farming: All livestock and farm machinery.
- Class B – Articles manufactured in Colorado: Includes carriages, wagons, garden implements, cheese presses, sausage cutters, shoes/boots, post-hole diggers, wheel barrows, horse-shoes, wash machines, milk pans, furniture, art work and jewelry.
- Class C – Minerology: The best gold and silver bullion from any mine in the county as well as valuable deposits found in CO including copper, iron & coal.
- Class D – Agriculture and Vegetables: The best acre or half-acre of wheat, barley, corn, or oats. The best potatoes, turnips, beets, pumpkins, squash, melons, cabbage and cauliflower. The best fruits and flowers.
- Class E – Household and Pantry Goods: Embroidery, needle work, pine cone crafts, bead work, crocheting, table covers, and wax specimens. Recipe judging (esp. cakes) was one of the oldest competitions in fairs around the country dating to the early 1800’s.

The president of the Agriculture Society, Granville Berkley, made the first annual address at the fairgrounds, emphasizing the need for scientific farming. “One great mistake of the first settlers of the territory was that every effort, energy, and encouragement was given to the development of the mines, while agriculture seems to be lost sight of. Neither can prosper without the other. The only thing that might be regretted is that a little more pain had not been given by the exhibitors to write out a more minute and detailed statement of the time of planting, and the kind of soil it grew on, the cultivation, irrigation, etc.”. He then went on to recommend that files of all useful agriculture information be gathered, compiled, published, and made available through the archives of the Society.

Berkley was a man of flowery speeches and as having some of the first irrigation ditches dug in the Boulder area. He emphasized the need for agriculture diversification and predicted the Boulder Valley would soon support railways with the pending completion of the transcontinental railroad, telegraphs, academies, factories, and other aspects of civilization. He urged women to cultivate flowers and small fruits around their houses to make the homes attractive to their male relatives, and thus win them from the ways of temptation. He also stressed the need for an agricultural college. At this suggestion, some nay-sayers remarked, “The best way to learn is right there on the farm.”

Saturday was the last day of the fair and the excitement ran high. With an estimated 1,500 people present the first fair concluded with a mule race, for a premium of \$5, and a walking race around the track.

The fair was considered a great success. The cost of the event was \$5000 and the net receipts \$2500. Since the fair was organized for the general public welfare, the community generously made up the shortfall.

During the same week as the County Fair, a farmers' convention was held in Boulder and attended by farmers from surrounding counties. At the conclusion of the meeting there was a recommendation that individual farmers' clubs be organized in each of the Territorial districts to share information that agriculturalists, fruit growers and stockmen were interested in.

**1870** - In the spring of 1870 the County Agricultural Society met to plan the next county fair. They first established Life memberships for the Society at \$20. Once again agricultural and mineral displays were the focus of interest. Another decision was to build a round house on the fairgrounds for display of premium exhibits of county mineral and agricultural products. Additionally, a judge's stand, more livestock stables and corrals, race track improvements, concession stands, and saloons were in the development mix. The population of Boulder stood at 1,721 and Burlington had 213 permanent residents. Because of the hard rock mining boom the collective population of the mountain mining communities exceeded that of the plains.

Rich silver deposits had been discovered at Caribou a year earlier. The Caribou Lode owners brought down a large mass of ore 18 inches wide and 8 feet long to exhibit at the fair. It assayed at \$100/T. From the Marshall area, a piece of coal measuring 6 feet long and 4 ½ feet thick, weighing 11,000 lbs., was brought in for display.

Again, there were horse races, with prizes for both the fastest and slowest steeds. Additional entertainment included calf races, saddled yearling steer races, double harness races, steam engine and threshing demonstrations, and oxen pulling contests.

The Rev. C.M. Campbell was given the nod to offer the annual address at the 1870 fair. He recommended scientific farming and urged the establishment of an Agricultural College. The skeptics wondered, "What farmer's lad could be persuaded to board and clothe himself and attend college for four years for the purpose of learning how to plant potatoes and milk cows? Why would any young man of sense spend so much of the best part of his life learning something and earning nothing, when he can learn more, and earn a considerable amount in much less time by hiring out to some farmer? (Eight years later on 7-26-78 the construction of the Agricultural College in Ft. Collins was begun).

**1873** - 1873 was a transitional year. The Territorial fair in Denver changed hands from the Colorado Agricultural Society to the Colorado Industrial Association and premiums to be awarded were increased to \$15,000. In Boulder, emphasis at the fair was placed on mineral ores. Additionally, the race track was improved to retain its reputation as the finest track in all Colorado Territory.

The "Grange" fraternal organization, also known as the Patrons of Husbandry, began organizing in Boulder County with the Valmont and Left Hand Granges among the first. It was born out of necessity because agricultural conditions after the war were deplorable. The railroad rates

were so high farmers couldn't move their products, speculators were driving down commodity prices, and banks were asking prohibitive rates to borrow money.

**1874 -** In 1874, Boulder formed the Boulder County Industrial Association and Racetrack, a stock company, to replace the Agricultural Society. The popularity of horse racing prompted the Society to alter the sponsor name to include "Racetrack". F.A. Squires became the first President of the new Association. While earlier features of the fair continued, and a few new ones like rock-drilling contests and fireman's races were added, some other changes were introduced that gradually moved the entire event away from the original intent of the fair. The telegraph reached Boulder this year so a line was extended to the judges' stand at the fairgrounds for instant transmission of messages to Denver and elsewhere. Concessions were now leased instead of serving local beneficiaries.

**1875 -** It was noted in a September Boulder County News article that the Boulder County Fair was the only county fair to be held this year in the Territory.

A grandstand with a seating capacity of 1,000 was built at the fairgrounds as horse racing became the major attraction of the fair. The grandstand, instead of the round house, became the symbol of the new emphasis for the county fair. The fair was beginning to take on the aura of entertainment rather than the exhibition of agricultural and industrial pursuits. It was not accepted by all with some suggesting there ought to be a separate fair for those who were more interested in agriculture.

**1876 -** The State constitution was ratified by an all-male vote on July 1, 1876 – 15,443 for and 4,062 against. President Grant declared Colorado to be the thirty-eighth state to the Union on August 1<sup>st</sup>.

**1877 -** The Boulder County Industrial Association and Racetrack changed the timing of this fair to follow the territorial fair in Denver so many of the exhibits could be brought later to Boulder. There continued to be, "big vegetables, fast horses, gallant firemen, and rich ore". The display of farm machinery was added at this fair and crowds gathered as steam engines, threshers, hay presses and draft horses pulling plows labored under the sun. Farm production remained as a matter of primary concern, but the infiltration of gambling, liquor, and side shows came under increased scrutiny.

**1878** - In 1878, seven carloads of farm machinery were brought to Boulder from the Denver fair. Self-propelled machines and portable engines became a center-piece. The railroads offered discounted rates for fair-goers, greatly increasing the attendance. C. Boettcher (later of Valentine's Hardware in Boulder) exhibited a line of stoves, tinware and assorted hardware. The Erie Brass Band performed throughout the fair.

**1879** - A new feature of the fair in 1879 was the daily auction of livestock, to great advantage for Boulder County stockmen. Vegetables on display included popcorn, onions, carrots, peas, pumpkins and squash. But, operating primarily as a fair with exhibits, the Industrial Association was not making any money. At the conclusion of this year, it was \$3000 in debt and there was a strong sentiment to sell out.

Longmont was only 8 years old at this time but was eager to have the fair in their town. George Zweck, builder of the Zweck (Imperial) Hotel in Longmont, offered \$5,000 to have the fair moved to Longmont. But, having second thoughts about its' asset to the community, Boulder decided to liquidate the debt themselves and as a result the county fair event stayed in Boulder.

**1880** - In 1880, the county fair opened under new management. The old guard was removed and the Honorable Henry Newkirk was elected president. The shift in emphasis was immediately felt. Exhibiting and racing fast horses would be both entertaining and profitable. But complaints soon arose when a disproportionate amount of money for horse races was being spent vs. exhibits encouraging the basic agriculture foundation of the county. Additionally, there was gambling and gaming devices permitted and an excessive amount of liquor on the grounds. The main concern voiced was that it should be a fair, not mere entertainment. Even though some of the former activities persisted, the seeds of separation were sown.

**1881** - In 1881, George W. Chambers contributed the largest display of vegetables and John Brierley similar with flowers. But the special attraction was Col. John Chivington, the "hero of Sand Creek", who was invited as a speaker. Col. Chivington spoke of his 700 U.S. Volunteers who won a "smashing victory over marauding Indians" in November of 1864. But his talk fizzled. After an extensive congressional investigation, the full story of "The Sand Creek Massacre" of 200 peaceful Arapaho and Cheyenne people at Sand Creek in southeastern CO became known. It is a landmark chapter in the troubled history of Colorado and the American West.

**1885** - In 1885, the round house interior was refurbished with a new entry, floor, paint, exhibits and displays. This provided the springboard for the following year, 1886, when the *News-Banner* called that year, "the best fair ever. There was a beautiful sea of exhibits. The roundhouse was a monument of beauty." The livestock stalls were filled with prize animals and choice specimens of silver ores were exhibited. But the complaints of farmers, horticulturists, and gardeners were increasing that the fair was deviating from its original intent. Longmont, ever agriculture-minded, still coveted the fair.

**1891** - Attendance and whole-hearted participation in the county fair steadily deteriorated. In 1891, it was advertised that the fairgrounds would be disposed of at a Sheriff's sale. But the Industrial Association was once again bailed out and the fair revived for a time. Essential elements of the agriculture side of the county fair had been drifting to Longmont over the past six years.

**Late 1890's** - In 1896, a new grandstand was built at the fairgrounds, primarily for the horse races.

**Circa 1898** – Dr. John B. Schoolland, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at CU, noted in an interview late in his life that the City of Boulder held the county fair as late as 1898, but not after 1900.

*Boulder Pow Wow Succeeds County Fair Event in Boulder Location:*

**1934** – As a community effort to boost morale after the Depression years, the Boulder Pow Wow began August 1, 1934 on Colorado Day. Originally called Pay Dirt Pow Wow, the purpose was to bring miners and farmers to Boulder for a day of fun. Miners and farmers earned their wages from dirt, hence the nickname "pay dirt". The festivities, on what now is the YMCA and East Mapleton Ball Fields, included a parade downtown, rock-drilling contest, carnival, dance, and miner-farmer picnic. After an afternoon softball game with the Longmont All-Stars pitted against the Boulder All-Stars, the Elks Cowboy Band of Longmont entertained the crowd. Under the floodlights, the miner's rock-drilling contests were cheered on by 3,000 onlookers. Prizes included \$25 for "singlejack" entries and \$40 for "doublejack" teams. The event evolved into the Hard Rock Drilling Championship of Colorado and was on the program until the early 1950's.



**1939** – By 1939, a horse show and Boulder’s first rodeo since 1927 had become regular features. “Pay Dirt” was dropped from the Pow Wow name. A local riding and roping club began staging rodeo exhibitions during the Pow Wow in an adjacent pasture. Rancher Rollie Leonard donated his land from 28<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> St. and Mapleton to Pearl St. in the 1940’s and a barn-like indoor arena honoring him was built on the site. It was known as one of the best venues in the rodeo circuit for horse shows and rodeos.

The former “bathing girls water fight”, complete with fire hoses, gave way to Pow Wow Royalty with a queen and her lady-in-waiting.

**1957** – Over the years with the decline of hard rock mining in the county, the Pow Wow evolved into more of a Western-themed show. By 1957 the non-profit organization that sponsored the event hit financial hard times and was forced to sell eleven acres of their land to Boulder in lieu of back taxes. The City then gave some of those acres to the YMCA to construct facilities, lent some for 4-H activities, donated other acres for baseball fields, and still another parcel for the relocated Boulder Train Depot where the Barnes & Noble bookstore now sits.

**1973** – By 1973, the area around the Pow Wow grounds became too valuable for other urban uses. The Pow Wow Association refused the city’s offer to swap the remainder of the rodeo land for a site near Boulder Reservoir. Instead they looked elsewhere for a 100-acre site well outside of Boulder that could potentially accommodate both the Boulder Pow Wow and the Longmont county fair festivals.

**1981** - The event and arena grandstands were moved to Louisville in 1981, on a site south of Hecla Lake, and was renamed the Boulder Valley Pow Wow grounds. Due to demographic shifts and fading community support, the last event held was the Little Britches Rodeo in June, 1986. The Pow Wow organization no longer exists and their former event site in Louisville has been re-developed into residential uses.