

A GATHERING OF FRIENDS – History of the Boulder County Fair, CO

History of Fairs:

The history of fairs appears to be dated back into biblical times as well as Native American culture. References of people gathering in marketplaces, festivals, trade locations, religious feasts, and ceremonial grounds have been documented in written form as well as oral tradition.

Archaeologists have long noted that artifacts made from specific materials have been discovered in regions far distant from those natural sources. It can be best explained as “trade goods” that were exchanged along travel routes of nomadic peoples. In later times, powwows provided a central festival environment where tribal groups gathered to celebrate seasonal events, share cultures, and trade stories and hand-made goods.

Like so much else in western culture, “agricultural fair” has its basis in Latin. “Agricola” is the Latin term for farmer, and the most likely source of “fair” is “feria” – a Latin term for “free day” or “holy day”, which was celebrated as a religious holiday. The blending of agriculture, commerce, and religion is consistent with our understanding that religion was at the center of most political, economic and social activities in ancient and medieval times. Over time, fairs became more secular with education, entertainment and competition displacing religion.

In the Middle Ages in England, fairs developed as temporary markets where wholesale traders travelled to locations where they could be sure to meet those they needed to buy from or sell to. These were often tied to special Christian religious occasions and the annual fairs provided the opportunity for sales of animals and other wares.

In western Europe there was a blending of religion and commerce that resulted in periodic gatherings, or “fairs” that brought together producers of all types of commodities for the purpose of barter, exchange, or sale. To this marketplace were later added entertainment and other forms of activity. Modern church bazaars, as a source of revenue for churches, are thought to have their roots in early religious fairs.

In the historic American West, explorers, hunters, mountain men, and trappers met periodically at a predetermined “Rendezvous” location to barter and sell animal furs, hides, and assorted wares. Fairs were as much social as commercial endeavors, giving people a chance to get together and share a story or two of their adventures as well as exhibit their products.

In 1765, the first North American agricultural fair took place in Windsor, Nova Scotia. In Upper Canada a fair was held in 1792, sponsored by the Niagara Agricultural Society. Both of these fairs continue to operate today.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Elkanah Watson, a New England farmer and businessman, has been bestowed the title of “Father of the US agricultural fairs”. He initially showcased his sheep in his home town square in 1807. From that event he organized the Berkshire Agricultural Society and created a Cattle Show in Pittsfield, MA in September 1811. \$70 of prize money was paid out in the competition for the best exhibits of oxen, cattle, swine and sheep.

Mr. Watson worked diligently helping communities organize their own agricultural societies and fairs. By 1819 most counties in the New England States had organized their own fairs and the movement was spreading across the country. In 1841, the first county fair in IL was held in Naperville, and the first state agricultural fair in the U.S. was held that same year in Syracuse, NY. It highlighted New York’s prize winners from the county fairs throughout that state in the livestock and food production categories.

Overall, 47 of the 50 states currently have a state fair, with Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts opting out in favor of a combined Eastern States Exposition (“The Big E”). It has been held since 1917 and is the 6th largest agricultural fair in the country. Many fairs around the U.S. went on hiatus between 1860-70 because of the Civil War.

Following the Civil War, rodeo competitions emerged, with the first held in Cheyenne, WY in 1872. The first professional rodeo where admission was charged and trophies were awarded was held in Prescott, AZ in 1888. Between 1890 and 1910 the offerings at rodeos included Wild West entertainment shows featuring individuals such as Buffalo Bill Cody and Annie Oakley. By 1910 several major rodeo events in the West became established including the Calgary Stampede, Pendleton Round-up and Cheyenne Frontier Days. In 1985, a new breed of rodeo contestant emerged including young, athletic men and women from urban backgrounds. One third of the PRCA members now have a college degree while one half of the competitors had never worked on a cattle ranch.

Entertainment became important as county fairs re-started and competed with national expositions during what was considered the golden age of agricultural fairs between 1870 and 1910. Many fairgrounds owners/operators sought out enough acreage to provide one-half-mile oval tracks for harness racing and speed trials. Trotting and pacing competitions, bicycle races, balloon ascensions, and eventually automobile races, airplane demonstrations and pyrotechnic displays became commonplace.

Early in the decade of the 1900’s, the Illinois Farmers’ Institute began encouraging boys and girls to exhibit fair entries. They also began sponsoring county and regional chapters of a new national youth movement called 4-H. This movement provided a revitalization of livestock and domestic arts competition and was considered a reaction to the growing bawdiness of fairs at that time.

The core elements of these annual events are at the heart of the agricultural fairs today. It is competition for the best agricultural and domestic products of the county, region or state, and an annual celebration for the community to gather together to share, to learn, and to have fun.

Despite the diminishing presence of agriculture in our urbanizing world, there remain over 3200 fairs in North America, according to the International Association of Fairs and Expositions, and attendance exceeds 150 million people each summer. They still provide industrial equipment and technology demonstrations, a chance to show off the best in agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, homemade food and craft items, art work, other products from that region, educational activities from the 4-H and FFA youth development programs, mid-ways, amusement rides, food, and entertainment shows.