

First Greenbrier County Fairs

The Declaration of Independence was only 78 years old when the first recorded fair was conducted in Greenbrier Valley, VA. In 1854, the Greenbrier Agricultural Society began organizing and having annual fair where agricultural accomplishments could be displayed. This popular event attracted entries of livestock, produce and household items from farms throughout the area.

The first fair was conducted at Mr. Nesmith's Grove on approximately 2 acres of land. The location of this event was determined by current historians to be at the corner of Washington and Lee Streets in Lewisburg, about 150' northeast of the present location of Lewisburg United Methodist Church. A transcript of the minutes from the first event include...

(Transcript of Greenbrier Agricultural Society Minutes)

The first recorded fair was conducted in Greenbrier Valley, Virginia beginning August 29, 1854 at Mr. Nesmith's Grove. The Greenbrier Agricultural Society was called to order by President of the Society, Louis A. Alderson, at 11 o'clock A.M. – which being done, the President of the Society introduced to the assembled crowd, William H. McFarland Esq. of Richmond City, who had been invited and accepted the invitation to deliver an address to the Society at the First Annual exhibition, after which the Company partook of the sumptuous repast prepared by the Ladies of Lewisburg and vicinity – the judges of the various Classes of Stock and articles entered to contend for premiums and entered upon the duties for which they were selected – at half past 5 o'clock P.M. it was moved that the exhibition be closed until 10 o'clock tomorrow morning which was carried –

At 10 o'clock A.M., August 30th, the Society was again called to order by President Alderson – at 11 o'clock A.M., Dr. E.P. White of Caroline County delivered a very interesting address and was elected an Honorary member of the Society.

At 2 o'clock P.M., the judges rendered awards for the various Classes of Animals, cattle: cows, bulls, heifers, steers and oxen; horses: stallions, brood mares, saddle mares, colts, jacks, jennets and mules; sheep; & chickens. Also included in the judged entries were agricultural implements: plows, ox yoke & wheat fans; fruits & dairy products; household manufactures: quilts, woolen items, embroider, bread, corned beef, & bacon ham; and finally, domestic manufactures: bureaus, bed stands, saddles, harnesses, flour, cooking stoves, oil painting and penmanship.

In 1858 the Lewisburg event gained the distinction of being called "a fair of proportions" and featured many entries including an iron-gray yearling colt that took home the blue ribbon (the colt would later gain fame as Robert E.

Lee's warhorse, Traveller). Also on display at this show, was the first sewing machine ever brought to the County.

The formation of West Virginia during the Civil War placed Greenbrier County in the new state and it was in 1869 that a fair was conducted for the first time in Lewisburg, WV. Once again a famous animal was entered in the fair as the Ludington Steer took home top honors. This Shorthorn steer, owned by Mr. Samuel C. Ludington, was the largest steer in the world, weighing 4,450 pounds and was noted for being "so broad across the back that a half-bushel of shelled corn could be poured on its back and not a grain would roll off".

The next county fair was named the Greenbrier Valley Industrial Exposition when it was conducted in Alderson from 1883 to 1889. This fair was the first noted exhibition where demonstrations and displays of technology were shown along with the agricultural displays. Recent advances in farming equipment and house wares were popular attractions for fairgoers of all ages.

The fairgrounds were located just north of Alderson on property later owned by Camp Greenbrier. When the fair returned to Lewisburg in 1891, it was conducted on property that accommodated many of the activities. An announcement in the Rules and Premiums book for that year describes the fairgrounds as "The Grand Stand is so situated as to completely overlook the Race Course, and from any position in it the gazer can see each stroke of the hoof of the speeding courser from the start to the finish, and is capable of seating 1,200 persons. A splendid speed track one-half mile in length. Everything is fresh, new and inviting. Ample provisions have been made for the safety and sheltering of stock. Capacious cisterns will furnish an abundant supply of water, and all that tends to the comfort of man and beast will be supplied...The grounds, situated one-fourth mile south of Lewisburg and three and one-half miles north of Ronceverte, Ches. & Ohio Railroad, affords facilities to persons living at a distance to visit the Exposition, and is easily accessible to all.

Entertainment during The Industrial Expositions consisted of flat racing, harness racing and novelty contests for visitors such as wheelbarrow races, potato races, and greased-pole climbing. Entries consisted of Agricultural Implements (Department XI) in which farming machinery including a turnip drill, root slicer, fanning mill, hillside plough, road scraper, and a gangplow were displayed.

Throughout the early fairs, individuals and businesses offered special prizes for specific contests or classes. Money was offered as premiums for displays such as: the best saddle Colt, halter broke, under one year old, \$2.50, by Jas. T. Rucker; \$2.50 by Silas B. Mason for the best Loaf of Bread; \$5 for the best drilled Soldier in the West Virginia National Guards, by J.W. A. Ford; and \$2.50 was offered by John D. Johnston for the best Bed-Spread knit by a girl 14 years or under.

Early successes and failures of fairs in Greenbrier County set the stage for the formation of an annual event that would be more popular and successful than any of its predecessors. Although there are no records to show the existence of an annual event during the early years of the 1900s, small community fairs, which consisted of neighbors meeting to display their goods, continued throughout the period.

One of the highlights of attending the fair was the family picnic. The first notation of picnics on the fairgrounds was in the 1896 Exhibitors' Guide that had everything closing from 12:30 P.M. until 1:00 P.M. for dinner. This tradition, which had existed from the earliest fairs, was a stopping point for everyone to relax and regroup before continuing their exciting day. Preparing for the picnic was usually done the day before attending the fair and the meal almost always consisted of the same basic foods including fried chicken, potato salad, fresh tomatoes, and other fresh garden vegetables.

Greenbrier Valley Fair: Predecessor of Today's State Fair

From 1917 through 1920 a successful Shorthorn Association Show began the movement to have an annual fair in the county. A group of local men incorporated the Greenbrier Valley Fair on March 19, 1921 and an annual tradition was born. Land was purchased about a mile east of the Watts Farm where the Shorthorn Show had been held in 1917 and 1919 (in 1918 the show was at the Ross Tuckwiller Farm west of Lewisburg). The new location placed the fair between the outskirts of the growing town of Lewisburg and the railroad boomtown of Ronceverte.

On March 19, 1921, the founders of the Greenbrier Valley Fair chartered their annual event with the signing of a document and began a tradition that would become the State's largest fair.

The first two Fair catalogues listed the place of exhibition as Ronceverte, as designated in the charter of the event, and in 1923 the location of the grounds was listed as Lewisburg-Ronceverte. As the community between Lewisburg and Ronceverte grew, a post office was established and the area became known as Fairlea, which is the physical location of today's fairgrounds.

During the first stockholders meeting it was approved that the Board of Directors be "authorized, empowered and directed" to carry out the contract with A.M. Caldwell for the purchase of property (approximately 40 acres of land) lying on the road leading from Lewisburg to Ronceverte, adjoining Howard Smith and the Ott heirs, and known as the Driscoll Land, at the price of \$11,500, to use for the fairgrounds.

During the early years, the Fair consisted of five event-filled days and the fairgrounds immediately began to take shape as buildings and other contest areas were created.

In April, 1921, an old railroad track was taken up and a racetrack graded by teams of horses furnished by the Wilson Bros., Tuckwiller Bros., John Sydenstricker, Julian Arbuckle, Bright Farrier, Ed Sydenstricker, Howard Arbuckle and Alex Arbuckle. Together they built the one-half mile track that is still used today.

Within a few years of the charter signing there were stables, cattle barns and exhibit buildings, as well as a grandstand and a stage on the fairgrounds. Cattle and horses dominated the animal shows with the largest number of cattle representing the Shorthorn breed. Sheep, swine, rabbits, chickens, ducks and other farm animals filled the barns and show rings. In addition to the open shows, there were boys and girls representing Agricultural Clubs (4-H) from throughout the state competing in Junior Livestock Judging Contests and showing their livestock.

For many fairgoers and exhibitors, coming to the fair involved traveling for several miles in slow moving vehicles or on horseback, over rough roads and occasionally not in the best weather conditions. Exhibitors carefully prepared their items for showing. Home sewn items were folded and protected during the trip by older items or newspaper. Canned goods that were to be entered arrived securely packed in crates. Farm equipment, which was to be displayed, arrived on wagons, was pulled to the fairgrounds or was driven and then carefully cleaned and polished for the show. Many exhibitors entered several categories and some had entries in different departments. The prizes were ribbons, money, certificates or other special rewards that denoted the exhibit's winnings at the Fair.

Contracting national entertainers to perform began when the gates opened to the Fair in 1921. Showcased during the first exhibition, was Harry Wheadon in his Sensational Novelty Slack Wire Act; the Roza Rentz Trio, featuring one lady and two gentleman in mid-air attractions; Robin, King of the Comedy Jugglers; and a nightly finale by Pain's Fireworks which proclaimed "nothing like it has ever been seen in West Virginia!". Fair officials took great pride in offering the finest entertainment each year. It was considered a goal to always provide amusements that were wholesome, educational and good, clean fun. No unlawful concessions or suggestive shows were allowed. Many types of entertainment were represented at the Fair and leading performers or well-known groups appeared in concerts or shows throughout the duration of the event.

From the minute the gates opened on the first day until the last visitor left the grounds each night, the Greenbrier Valley Fair offered fun, excitement, entertainment, education, exhibits and so much more to the thousands who

came to see the sights. Each year the fair changed, adapted and reflected the society around it. For two decades the Fair provided visitors the opportunity to escape from their normal lives and discover something new. The annual fair in Greenbrier County was looked forward to with great anticipation and one of the best topics of discussion throughout the year consisted of planning a trip to "The Fair"!

Becoming the Fair...

The Greenbrier Valley Fair was one of the state's most popular events and every year it attracted thousands of people, animal shows, carnival excitement, grandstand entertainment, races, exhibits, special contests and much more. This made the annual event an end-of-summer celebration for families from West Virginia and surrounding states.

On March 19, 1941, the State Legislature, realizing the Fair's tremendous popularity and potential, passed an act that designated the Greenbrier Valley Fair as the State Fair of West Virginia. The act is recorded in Chapter 19, Article 7, Section 9 of the Code of West Virginia. The opening letter for the 1941 Exhibitors Guide described the change to Greenbrier Valley Fair exhibitors...

The Fair Management takes pleasure in announcing that by an act of the 1941 Legislature our Fair has been made "The State Fair of West Virginia", and after this year will operate under, and be known by that name. It is through the hearty cooperation of our exhibitors, and the loyal support of our friends and patrons throughout our state as well as neighboring states, that this recognition has been made possible.

This milestone in the Fair's history was to be a highlight of the 1942 event, but the celebration had to be postponed due to the onset of World War II. While the country was at war, rationing of necessities, shortages of goods and the huge number of men who were gone from the area led the Board of Directors to pass a resolution stating...

In taking assessment of the war situation, which has necessitated government restricting of the sale of auto tires, the rationing of gasoline, the regulation and the possible restrictions in the near future of all forms of travel and transportation except that which is absolutely necessary, we recognize an insurmountable obstacle in the way of conducting our fair and whereas, it is also our desire to conform to the cheerfully acquiesce in any action deemed necessary by the government in its war effort, now therefore, in it resolved that we abandon our

efforts to operate this year and definitely call off our fair for 1942.

Not only was the Fair cancelled in 1942, it was also absent in 1943, 1944 and 1945. The Board records show it was favored by member to have a Fair in 1945, but when it was not conducted, there are no records revealing why it was cancelled.

The gates did open again in 1946 and the annual event resumed with all of its excitement and shows. There was something missing however as the crowds filled the fairgrounds, children. An outbreak of measles had reached epidemic proportions and many parents, fearful of their children being exposed to the disease, came to the Fair without their youngsters. The children who did come discovered many of the same attractions which kids had enjoyed every year of the Greenbrier Valley Fair, including carnival games and rides, animal shows, racing, entertainers and exhibits.

In 1956, the fairgrounds began to grow with the purchase of the "Simons Property", and land at the south end of the racetrack was purchased from Barton Ott. The Board also passed a motion to build a sheep pavilion, convert the rabbit show area to a swine facility, and to build a new rabbit house. In 1958, changes and additions were made to the industrial building.

Capital improvements continued to be made in the 1960's with the construction of a new grandstand. This addition would provide more than 6,000 seats, including additional seats placed on the racetrack. This improvement would "set the stage" for larger shows, bigger audiences and top entertainers to perform at the Fair.

Through the following decades, the fairgrounds continued to change and grow and each year the goal is to provide a bigger and better show. The one thing that remains the same, from the early fairs thru today, is the commitment to agriculture and family values. A mission statement adopted by the Fair's Board of Directors states:

The mission of the State Fair of West Virginia is to produce a quality fair committed to the traditions of agriculture, family entertainment and education and to develop non-fair events that utilize the existing facilities, that create opportunities for growth and that benefit the community served by the facility.

Each year the Fair opens with new excitement, new shows and the same feeling of being at an old time event. Since 1921, the State Fair of West Virginia has been a family event and it will continue to be for years to come.