

## Fairs and Farmers' Institutes

Agriculture was a central part of life in Ohio in the 19th century – and that certainly includes the Canal Winchester area. Fairs were an integral part of that agricultural life. They provided camaraderie, entertainment, social opportunities, competition, and a chance to learn from one another – all those components that we would call "networking" today. Therefore, as the celebration of the Ohio Bicentennial commences, a look at the history of fairs in the Canal Winchester area seems appropriate.

Many of the larger fairs in Ohio in the 19th century were set up and governed by Agricultural Boards or Agricultural Societies. On February 27, 1846, a "Bill for the Encouragement of Agriculture" was passed in Ohio creating the Ohio State Board of Agriculture. This board established the Ohio State Fair. The first State Fair was held in 1850 and, except for the World War II years, has been held annually since. We know that residents of Madison Township<sup>1</sup> have won premiums at the State Fair since at least 1851. The Ohio State Fair has continued to be a much anticipated event for the people of Canal Winchester to attend as exhibitor or visitor each August.

On September 6, 1851, the Franklin County<sup>1</sup> Agricultural Society was organized. The first Franklin County Fair was held in October 1851. Bareis records that the citizens of Madison Township won 11 of the 64 premiums offered at that first fair – for livestock, needlework (a quilt), and even best road (the Columbus and Groveport Turnpike Co.). The premiums won by those Madison Township entrants ranged from \$1 to \$5 each. According to Bareis, the Franklin County Agricultural Society quickly purchased land for its fairground. Franklin Park in Columbus was used for approximately 90 years before the fairground was relocated to its present location in Hilliard, Ohio, where the fair is held annually in July. The people of Madison Township still participate in the Franklin County Fair – especially the young people in the 4-H and Future Farmers of America organizations.

In the fall of 1857, the Madison Township Agricultural Society was organized. The first fair was held that same fall and annually until 1875. The 1875 fair was a failure due to rain. The fairground was located on the Groveport and Winchester Pike and contained about seven acres. A special stable was erected on the fairground for John Rarey's famous horse, Cruiser<sup>2</sup>. In the summer of 1878, the grounds and buildings were sold under an order of execution. Bareis states that there is "no question but that the Madison Township Agricultural Society had much to do with the development of the stock and grain industries of the township." The common, but unverified, report was that "more stock was entered for exhibition at this fair during its first years than at the Franklin County or even at the Ohio State Fairs."

The Ohio State, Franklin County and Madison Township Fairs were regional fairs where area citizens exhibited their livestock, crops, and domestic items. They were events that many people attended for entertainment. In addition to these regional fairs, Canal Winchester established and enjoyed its own local fairs.

Many of the farmers in the Canal Winchester area were members of the Grange – an organization with an agricultural orientation. The Grange offered both educational and social opportunities for the farmers. There were four Granges in Franklin County in the late 19th century: Hamilton of Groveport, Blendon of Westerville, Borrer's Corners in southeastern Franklin County, and Madison of Canal Winchester. The Pomona Granges were distinct organizations, but made up of the subordinate Granges of the county in which they were located – in effect, County Granges. The Franklin County Pomona Grange met quarterly with one meeting each year at each of the subordinate Granges.

On October 16, 1895, as part of the Franklin County Pomona Grange meeting held at Groveport, a fair for the Grange members was held. The Times reported that this was "said to be the first fair of the kind held in the state and Franklin county farmers are again at the head of the class." Categories for entries included: wheat, corn, potatoes, apples, clover seed, pumpkins, squashes, bread, cake, butter, pickles, and needlework. "The fair exceeded the expectations of the members of the Grange, both as to exhibits and attendance. The great success of this event assures that there will be similar exhibits in future years and that the interest of the public is sure to increase with each recurring event. While the exhibit was, of course, not as large as that at the State Fair, yet it was large for a county exhibit and a finer one we never saw."

On Wednesday, October 21, 1896, the Pomona Grange again had a fair at its meeting – this time at the Madison Grange in Canal Winchester. It was decided that competition would be restricted to the membership, but everyone in the community was urged to attend, without charge. Premiums ranged from 15¢ to 50¢ for first place, and from 10¢ to 25¢ for second place. There were 31 categories in the following areas: grains, fruits, vegetables, baked goods, canned goods, fancy work, and flowers. The cash premiums for the Grange Fair totaled \$12.25 – which would have been a substantial sum<sup>3</sup> in 1896.

The Pomona Grange Fair is considered to be the beginning of the Canal Winchester Fair tradition. The Times reported that there was a large audience and "all were much pleased with the fine quality and large variety of exhibits." The Times went on to "suggest that such a fair could be profitably held each year" and that if the Grange were to "undertake it they would meet with ready encouragement from the progressive people of both town and country." On October 21 and 22, 1898, a fair was held in the old skating rink with 169 exhibitors and nearly 600 entries, and despite "disagreeable" weather, an

estimated 1,000 visitors. Both this 1898 fair and one in 1899 were held under the auspices of the Madison Grange, but the "expositions had grown to such proportions that the Grange felt it could no longer manage them unaided, and accordingly, the citizens of the community were asked to assist. Hence a meeting was called and a regular organization perfected."

On August 2, 1900, a constitution and by-laws were adopted, declaring the "object of The Canal Winchester Fair Association shall be the advancement of the social and educational interests of the community." In 1900, under the auspices of this new association, the Canal Winchester Agricultural and Art Fair was held at the Central Ohio Baling Company. Prior to 1901, the premiums and expenses were donated by community members in cash and merchandise. At a meeting held March 15, 1901, it was decided to charge a small admission fee of 10¢ and offer cash premiums. Citizens were solicited to establish a guarantee fund in case the receipts were insufficient to meet all the expenses. The rules printed in The Times that year included as rule number one: "competition open to the world." In 1904 The Times reported that it "is well known that every fair heretofore held by the Canal Winchester Association has been a success far beyond expectation, and it is a fact that they have been constantly growing in interest and importance."

Departments created by the Fair Association were: grains and grasses, roots and vegetables, fruits, flowers, domestics, household fabrics and fancy work, poultry and pet stock, livestock, amateur photography and painting, and prehistoric and pioneer relics and curios. On March 12, 1903, The Times announced that The Canal Winchester Fair Association had decided to add a new department for the fair exhibits. It would be known as "Book No. 11 – Display of School-work." A few of the categories for competition were: a display of general work, display of apparatus used in teaching, set of school records kept by any teacher, and a collection in nature study. As for the premiums in this new department, "in some instances cash premiums will be awarded but in most cases handsome diplomas will be given." The first rule of the new department said that the display must represent the work of all the pupils of the school, not a select class of pupils. Another rule stated that the teacher had to certify that the work was done by the pupil without assistance and during school hours, except for the nature study.

In January of 1903 the Canal Winchester Fair Association "took a long step in advance when it was unanimously decided to lease suitable ground for permanent quarters and erect thereon buildings to contain the exhibits. As a preliminary to this step, the executive committee was authorized to have the association incorporated without delay, after which it is the purpose to raise the funds by stock subscription. The committee was also authorized to make an effort to secure a suitable location." In 1906, six acres were leased north of the railroad tracks on the west side of town, new buildings were built, and there were 1,000 entries. In 1908, the Fair Board leased Gayman's ball park south of the railroad tracks on the east side of town, and moved the buildings to the new location. The lease ran out in 1913 and the fair board sold its property.

Even though the Canal Winchester Fair Association had come to an end, celebrations in Canal Winchester with fair-type events had not. The first school fair was held by the Canal Winchester Schools on Friday, October 24, 1919, with agricultural exhibits, home economics exhibits, a relic room, and a carnival "worked up by the high school pupils." In 1925, a Canal Winchester Festival and Community Fair was held on October 8, 9, and 10, and, in 1926, the Canal Winchester Fall Festival and Agricultural and Home Economics Exhibit was held. In 1928, the Fall Festival was sponsored by the Leach Benson Post #220 of the American Legion. The Legion continued to sponsor this festival for many years. In 1930, a Community Fair sponsored by the Home Economics and Agricultural Department at the school was held and the annual fair was continued into the 1950's.

Today, Canal Winchester continues this tradition with the annual Labor Day Festival, a three-day event held each Labor Day weekend. The first Labor Day Festival was held in 1960 and sponsored by the school's Athletic Boosters. It was only a one-day event with a parade, bar-be-cue chicken, and a wrestling match. There is now a Labor Day Committee in charge of the event and many community groups are part of the celebration – the Historical Society has its annual ice cream social as part of the Labor Day Festival. Among the various weekend activities is still the annual Labor Day Parade.

As well as fairs, the agricultural community held "Farmers' Institutes" or conventions that were basically educational in nature. At the annual meeting of the Ohio State Board of Agriculture in the Fall of 1880, the desire was expressed to co-operate with local or county agricultural societies and Granges in calling and organizing Farmers' Institutes or Agricultural Conventions. These institutes were designed to be both educational and entertaining. The first Autumn Meeting of the Central Ohio Farmers' Institute was held in the City Hall, Columbus, on October 20th and 21st, 1887, with the program featuring "music and appropriate addresses and essays."

With aid from the State Board of Agriculture, the Franklin Farmers' Institute was formed and the first institute was held at Groveport on Friday and Saturday, December 23rd and 24th, 1887. These events featured speakers on topics of interest to the farmers, and at least one featured musical entertainment by the Winchester Brass Band. In addition to the winter institutes, the Franklin Farmers' organization had summer picnics. The first was held in O. P. Chaney's grove on August 13, 1891. The picnics featured speakers and entertainment, just as the institutes did. At the picnic on August 17, 1893, the attendance was estimated at between 2,000 and 3,000. The scheduled entertainment for the 1903 picnic featured the Groveport Band, the Otterbein Quartet, and a Graphophone<sup>4</sup>.

Farmers' Institutes continued well into the 20th century. Hamilton Township in Franklin County and Bloom Township in Fairfield County each held Farmers' Institutes in the late 1920's. (Both are neighboring townships to Canal Winchester and would have had a large agricultural community in that era.) In the 1950's, a name change created the Community Institute of Bloom Township for Bloom Township. The Community Institute meeting held January 30th and 31st, 1953, at Wagnalls Memorial in Lithopolis, Ohio, featured speakers and entertainment, just like those first institutes. The entertainment was provided by school groups as well as individual members of the community. The Bloom Township Institute continued into the 1960's.

Although Canal Winchester does not have a fair as such in the 21st century, members of the community still participate in the county fairs, and the state fair. The competition, entertainment, education, and excitement are still much anticipated and enjoyed.

1 Canal Winchester is located in the southeast corner of Madison Township. Madison Township is located in the southeast corner of Franklin County in central Ohio.

2 John Rarey ( 1827 – 1866 ) was a famous horse trainer from Groveport, Ohio. He developed a world-wide reputation as a horse-tamer. The principles of his system were kindness, patience, and firmness. According to Bareis, "as a horse trainer he never had a superior and probably never had an equal. Today, he is being called the original horsewhisperer – at least in Ohio.

In the 1850's, he went to England to work and to teach his training methods. The Earl of Dorchester had a blooded, dark bay stallion named Cruiser who was so vicious that he was kept in an iron muzzle. Rarey tamed Cruiser and eventually brought him back to Groveport – Canal Winchester's neighboring town in Madison Township.

3 The Times provided the following examples of 1896 prices: porterhouse steak – 12¢ per pound; eggs – 8¢ per dozen (if you didn't have your own chickens and had to buy eggs); shoes – \$1 to \$2 per pair; 26½ acres of land – \$500.

4 According to the Random House Dictionary, Graphophone is the trademark name of a phonograph for recording and reproducing sounds on wax records.

Note: Sources for this tidbit include, but are not limited to: The Times, Canal Winchester's weekly newspaper dating to 1871; the 1902 History of Madison Township by George Bareis; and the 1992 Canal Winchester: The Second Ninety Years by Lillian Carroll and Frances Steube.