

1918 Hilliard hosts 1st official fair here

Once a county showcase, exhibition has entered world of commercialism

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McNutt, chairperson of publicity for the Franklin County Fair and a member of the Board of Directors, said the county fairs during 1851 through 1910 were mainly developed as agricultural shows and admission to the fairs was free. The fair board was trying to pay premiums and also bring in attractions for the fair-goers. It would cost 5 cents to enter your goods, but the paid premium would be 10 cents. The fair did not have the budget to conduct it and just went into debt.

McNutt said, "At that time, the Agricultural Society and Board of Directors were responsible for that debt and they were getting into some hard times, so rather than run out of money, there was no fair in 1913."

For the very first time on Sept. 30, 1918, Hilliard hosted the Franklin County Fair at the location which continues to this day. A lease was signed by George Weaver and his son, James, with the Franklin County Agricultural Society giving year-round use of 20 acres, and designating that one week be used for the Franklin County Fair. Then, as now, local



Six fair-goers stroll down the midway in 1959.

businesses displayed their merchandise, which was mainly agricultural and farming.

The harness races and midway attractions existed then as they do now, but today there is a tendency toward a more commercialized

fair, which is necessary to offset the costs of maintaining and running a fair.

McNutt said, "The games and commercialism is necessary because it's beyond comparing the educational value of the agricultural products and the showcases. They all need to be paid for and the rides and games pay for all these things."

Baking, canning and needlework, as well as the junior fair-goers and entrants of 4-H, Future Farmers of America and other youth organizations were and still are traditions of the county fairs.

Until about 25 years ago, however, entrants of the junior fair would receive travel money in addition to their premiums, dependent upon the distance they and their animal had to travel. There were also trips to 4-H conferences and special awards which were sponsored by local businesses, but this, too, is in the past.

McNutt talks of many changes in traditions since the first county fair. Before the advent of the automobile, most families would travel a long time and distance by horse and buggy, or perhaps walk, to the fair. This was a time for family reunions, and as it took so long to travel, the fair-goers stayed the entire length of time on the grounds, camping and mingling with family and friends—this was their yearly vacation.

McNutt said, "We've seen the traditions change from an agricultural showcase where people could bring their agricultural

commodities in. There were educational clinics along with their goods—people told about their entry, and what they did to make it a winner." Even after the fair-goers were driving the "electric

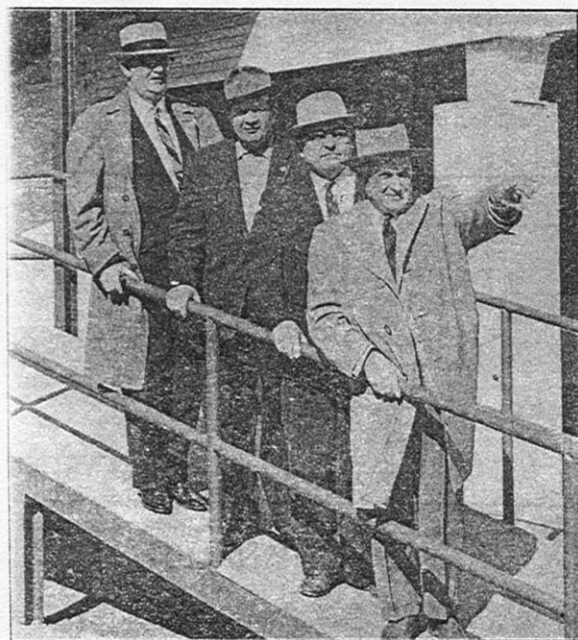
buggy," many still camped on the grounds for several days.

Perhaps the most joyous celebration in the history of the Franklin County Fair was on Aug. 15, 1945, when victory over Japan in World War II was declared.

In 24 hours, more people converged upon the Franklin County Fair than ever anticipated as the entire county was in a mood for celebrating. All businesses in the county were closed in honor of this day and as Americans wanted to go out and celebrate, more than 22,000 people swarmed to the fairgrounds and the crowds stayed until well after midnight.

Suddenly automation set in, trips to the fair were made in a matter of minutes or in an hour or two. People now came to the fair for a day's jaunt, not returning until the next year's fair. Games of chance changed, commercialism (out of necessity) became a part of the county fair. But the boys still brought their sweeties, and children were still awed by the sights.

What is history to today's youth is a memory and actuality to their grandparents—perhaps they view today's fair as they lived it 50 years ago.



Coming down the grandstand ramp in 1959 (from left to right) are Commissioner Henry Koontz, Fair Secretary Findley DeWolfe, Commissioner D.J. Kunz and Fair President Ray Dellinger.



Bob Evans, left, was on hand at the fair in 1963. Evans congratulates young Dave Watkins for showing the grand champion hog.