

History of Chautauqua County Fair

by Dave Wilson

The Chautauqua County Agricultural Society was first organized in 1821 in Mayville, NY with Judge Zattu Cushing of Fredonia as President.

At this time much of the land in the southern part of the County was still wilderness but farms were developing along the northern and central part of the County and serious interest in agriculture was developing.

The first fair of which we have record was held in 1821. "In July of 1821, a list of premiums to be awarded at the next annual cattle show and fair was published in the Chautauqua Gazette. Among the premiums offered was \$8 for the best cultivated farm of not less than 50 acres; \$5 for the best farm of not less than 25 acres of improved lands; \$4 for the best bull; \$5 for the best merino lamb; \$5 for the best blooded English lamb; \$5 for the best acre of corn; \$5 for the best acre of flax and \$5 for the best one-eighth acre of tobacco."

This organization soon expired in 1886 "due to lack of patronage from the State" but interest in the agricultural society continued.

The Agricultural Society was revived in October 1837 when citizens met at Mayville and elected Judiah Tracy as president and William Pendergast II as secretary. Ajourned to January 4, 1838 when a new County Agricultural Society was formed with new officers elected. William Prendergast II was chosen president. The design of the society, as expressed in its constitution was "to improve agriculture, horticulture, the household arts, the breeding and improvement of domestic animals and also the improvement of farming utensils and domestic manufactures."

Fairs were held at irregular intervals rather than on a regular annual basis. In 1849 the fair was held in Sinclairville, on September 10-11, 1851 the annual fair of the Agricultural Society was held at Panama. In 1874 the Ag Society purchased land on Baker Street, Jamestown for a fair grounds.

In 1880 a number of prominent men of Dunkirk and the vicinity met and organized under the name of the Agricultural Society of Northern Chautauqua with a capital stock of 500 shares at \$10 each.

On February 9, 1880 William and Jane Lines sold a 24 acre parcel in the Town of Dunkirk to Francis May of Dunkirk for \$2373.50. On March 10, 1880, Francis May sold the referenced property as recently purchased from William Lines and his wife to the Agricultural Society of Northern Chautauqua for \$2388.68, \$888.68 to be paid now and \$1500 to be paid in two years with semi-annual interest.

The fair was held on Dunkirk grounds in 1881, the site of the current fair grounds. Francis May sold more land to the Society for \$1500 and improvements were made to the grounds and fairs continued, sometimes alternating between Dunkirk and Jamestown locations by a vote of directors at their annual meetings.

We do have a record that in 1887 the Annual Fair and Livestock Exhibition was held and \$4,000 in premiums were offered, an unusually large sum at that time.

However, the fair operation was not a financial success and the organization again was abandoned and the property turned back to the original owners who had financed most of the improvements.

On May 16, 1891 a corporation was formed, the Dunkirk and Fredonia Agricultural Association. The object and nature of the business was managing and conducting a general dining and recreational park and agricultural society. The location was the Town of Dunkirk with the business office being in the city of Dunkirk, with a capital stock of \$6000, 120 shares at \$50 each.

On July 17, 1900, certificate of incorporation papers were filed for the Chautauqua County Agricultural Corporation. Ten days later, \$12,000 was given for the land that had been turned back to the original owners. The Central Avenue grounds were purchased and a Board of Directors of 11 persons were elected to manage the organization. Each town in the County had an honorary vice president in the new corporation. Capital stock was issued, 600 shares at \$10 each.

Fairs were held on the Dunkirk grounds continually after the 1900 re-organization until 1916.

In May, 1901 water lines were laid across properties to bring Fredonia water to the fair grounds until such time as Dunkirk could bring water to the city line.

The site was expanded by the purchase of additional property. In 1909 the fair was given a first Place rating in the State. The fairs at this time were held in late August.

In 1916 no fair was held due to financial problems. The property was again turned back to the previous owners and the cash (\$2,300) was divided among the investors.

In 1917 they re-organized again. Under the state's agricultural laws, in order to claim a refund of premiums from the State, a fair must have been in operation and complied with the laws of the State for at least three years and not more than one year must lapse in holding a fair, so the stockholders still had an equity in their franchise and in July 1917 a meeting was called in the Merchants Exchange rooms in Dunkirk to revive the fair. New stock was issued, increase from \$6000 to \$40,000 (4000 shares at \$10 each) and the re-purchase of the fairgrounds was negotiated in October, 1917. Electric lights were installed around the race track at this time.

In May 1924 the stock increase went from \$40,000 to \$150,000 (15,000 shares at \$10 each)

In 1927 and 1934 the fair was awarded an A-rating by the state. In 1927 only three fairs in the state were given this award.

Among unusual events we might mention that in 1919 an airplane which was performing stunt act during the fair crashed on the baseball diamond killing the pilot. Approximately 10,000 fairgoers witnessed the accident.

From 1917 until present, the fair has been held every year except the three years of World War II, during which the grounds and buildings were used by the U.S. Government to house prisoners of war and two years (2020 and 2021) for the global COVID-19 pandemic. Between 1942-1944, the fairgrounds were populated by a mixture of German, Italian and Japanese prisoners. The primary reason POW's were brought into our area was labor. The big concern of the farmers and food processors was manpower to harvest crops and help in the processing plants due to the military draft.

In July, 1972, the Chautauqua County Agricultural Corporation was re-incorporated as the Chautauqua County Agricultural and Fair Association, Inc. as a not-for-profit organization under Section 402 of the not-for-profit corporation law. It still operates under that incorporation today.

All the board members now and for many years past are working members as well as a policy-making and management board. Every board member is on a committee or chairman of a committee responsible for a specific department or activity in the fair. During fair week all board members are on the grounds most of the time, in an active or supervisory capacity.