

Farm Show Is 70 Years Old And Still Growing

HARRISBURG — It has been called the greatest exposition of its kind in the world, incorporating agriculture, technology, culture and entertainment into one event. Regardless of how you slice it, the Farm Show is part of our Pennsylvania heritage. The 71st Farm Show with its theme, "Pennsylvania Agriculture — Progress Through Technology," emphasizes the partnership of Pennsylvania's number one industry and technology in building a better life.

While the Farm Show makes no claims to revolutionizing Pennsylvania agriculture single-handedly, there can be no doubt that the annual expo serves as a valuable incentive to improving agriculture, providing a testing ground for the effectiveness of research, experimentation and education in producing higher quality crops and livestock. Like the industry, the Farm Show has experienced many growing pains during the last 70 years.

Its inception dates to the early days of "Penn's Woods" and founder William Penn, who sought to instill the importance of a strong agricultural program in the minds of the early settlers. That effort resulted in the first Philadelphia

fair in 1686 featuring displays of food products.

Agricultural shows gained an additional boost with the creation of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture in 1785. Through the combined efforts of that group and farmers throughout the state, a state fair was held in Chester County in 1823.

First State Fair

The educational value of such expos and the enthusiasm associated with them spread like wildfire. The idea of a more extensive state fair to promote all agricultural endeavors caught on with the mechanization of Pennsylvania farms. To keep pace with the rapid succession of new ideas and inventions, representatives from 50 counties banded together to form the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society in 1851 and conducted the first State Fair that year in Harrisburg. Paid admissions were close to 20,000 with total receipts of \$5,600.

In subsequent years, state fairs were held in different cities, allowing new groups of farmers and the general public to view the exhibits. The establishment of Penn State University in 1855 and

the State Board of Agriculture in 1876, the former Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, helped expand the educational role of those fairs.

Temporary abandonment of the state fair idea in 1899 led agricultural organizations to promote an annual winter farm show idea in 1907 when they gathered for their January meetings in the old Executive Building near the Capitol. There was a small show for milk, a modest show for butter and a big show for corn. A milking machine was demonstrated, while dairy supply and equipment manufacturers provided exhibits.

Birth of the Farm Show

Livestock and horticulture groups continued to push for an annual Pennsylvania state fair until 1916 when Charles Patton, then State Agriculture Secretary, invited agricultural leaders to meet with him in Lancaster. At that meeting the Farm Show was born.

Farmers weren't interested in a midway type of fair, but one geared specifically toward education, complete with exhibits and facilities to host their

meetings. Their objective was held true to this day. The original Farm Show Committee set January as the best month suited for the show, as a time when farmers are looking to buy their farm equipment, seed, fertilizer and supplies for the coming season.

The first Pennsylvania Farm Show was held in 1917. It was called the Pennsylvania, Corn, Fruit, Vegetable, Dairy Products and Wool Show, and featured educational displays and meetings for the various groups. The event was held in the Emerson Brantingham Building in Harrisburg and attracted about 5,000 farm and city residents and featured \$735 in premiums for the exhibitors. By comparison, the 1987 Farm Show offers \$155,010 in premiums in 30 departments, and is expected to attract over a half-million visitors.

From its beginning, the Farm Show has recognized the importance of our farm youth. It has served as an outstanding medium for both farm and urban youth, who flock to the show by the thousands. The first show had just 40 school boys competing in corn and potato judging. In 1923, a potato baking demonstration was staged by 4-H club members to boost the quality of Pennsylvania spuds. These buttered baked potatoes were sold at five cents each and became very popular. The Pennsylvania Potato Growers Association took over the sale in 1925. The baked potato is now a hallmark at the show.

In 1926, the first baby beef entries were brought to the growing exposition. The grand champion animal, a 1066-pound steer, brought 25 cents a pound at auction for a total of \$266.50. The 1983 grand champion steer shown by Annette Walter of Airville, York County, went for a record shattering price of \$12 a pound or a total of \$15,060! The 4-H livestock competition from all corners of the Commonwealth continue to be one of the more popular features at the Farm Show.

Farm Show's Growing Pains

By 1928, attendance had swelled to an estimated 50,000 visitors, forcing great crowds to stand for hours outside the main exhibit building, often in the snow and rain, waiting to see the exhibits. These conditions prompted calls for expanded facilities. Heeding that call, officials broke ground in 1928 for construction of the Main Farm Show Building. The cost of the structure and furnishings was about \$1.5 million. It was dedicated on January 19, 1931, the opening day of the 15th show. The event was officially named the Pennsylvania State Farm Show that same year.

With the new building came even greater enthusiasm. The number of farm products doubled. By 1935, the competitive exhibits numbered 10,000 and the Future Farmers of America Band made its debut, as did the Route 22 Bypass leading to the complex. With the increased activity, it became apparent that the small arena was no longer adequate. Original plans for a fair building in the 1920's included a coliseum-like structure. So the large arena, which added 75,000 square feet of floor space and 7,639 permanent seats, was constructed to accommodate the larger crowds. It was dedicated during the 23rd Farm Show in 1939 and features a 120-by-340-foot arena floor with no view-obstructing pillars. The immense roof is supported by eight, two-hinged, rigid frames or arches, each 235 feet long, hailed in 1939 as the largest of their kind.

Programming of events in the huge structure included the first in a series of Pennsylvania State Police Mounted Exhibitions, horse pulling contests, farm youth demonstrations and enlarged livestock competitions. The 1941 expo had the largest number of competitive farm products ever: 11,655. It was a most appropriate

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