

# Putting Down Roots

## After 80 years of wandering, an itinerant state fair finds home in Harrisburg

BY CRAIG BINGMAN

**Snyder County Correspondent**  
**BEAVER SPRINGS** — Pennsylvania can be proud of the Farm Show and its heritage. This year's show attendance is projected at one-half million (the record being 715,000 in 1974). The visitors will be viewing the most modern agricultural innovations in the world's largest free indoor agricultural exposition — the Farm Show Complex.

Roots of the Farm Show date back to William Penn days when he was instrumental in starting the first Philadelphia Fair in 1686. The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, the oldest organization of its kind in America with Ben Franklin and George Washington as members, organized a show in 1785. And in 1809, the Pennsylvania Society for Improving the Breed of Cattle sponsored a cattle show at Bush Hill in Philadelphia.

These shows were well attended as were others that followed, but a need for a central location to disseminate educational information was inevitable. The Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, responding to this need, formed the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society on Mar. 29, 1851. That same year the first state fair was held on Oct. 29, 30, and 31 along the river just a short distance from the present Farm Show Building.

### On The Move

Each succeeding year saw the state fair in different cities — Lancaster, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Wyoming, Norristown, Easton, Scranton, Erie, Williamsport, Bethlehem, Indiana, Uniontown, and Johnstown State fairs continued until 1899.

In fact, a 30-acre tract was leased in Philadelphia in 1884 to build permanent fair facilities, but due to a depressed economy bankruptcy prevailed.

Historically, several negative features dominated the state fairs admission was charged, no educational meetings for farmers were held and midways permitted all manner of sideshows.

To remedy the situation the Livestock Breeders Association pushed to amend the old State Fair Law and take it out of the hands of the State Agricultural Society. It wasn't until 1907 that their persistence paid off with a small show at the old Executive Building adjoining the Main Capitol. In 1909, a "Regular Winter Fair" was held at the Chestnut Street Auditorium and Hall. A large show was held in the Duquesne Gardens in Pittsburgh in 1911.

Thanks to the efforts of the Livestock Breeders Association, the State Board of Agriculture, the PA Dairy Union, the Holstein and Berkshire Breeders, and two poultry organizations, the first Farm Show was created. Known as the Pennsylvania Corn, Fruit, Vegetable, Dairy Products and Wool Show, the 1917 event was held on two floors of the Emerson-Brantingham Building at 10th and Market Streets.

The 10,000 square feet of space was room enough to accommodate 5000 visitors as well as 44 commercial exhibits. The first floor, known as "machinery hall", housed commercial exhibits and farm machinery. The second floor housed farm products along with commercial and educational displays.

By 1925 the attendance at the Farm Show reached 50,000 with great crowds standing in line an hour or more for two or three blocks. As many as 16 buildings were used to hold meetings and to house additional exhibits such as the "Electric Farm" in the Pax-

tang area and the Public Library in Harrisburg. Other locations—some unlikely—included: Rainbow Studio, Municipal Band Room, a row of garages on Briggs Street, and the old Car barns of the Harrisburg Railways Company. These buildings were so numerous that a map was created in 1925 to provide direction for the many visitors.

### A Need To Centralize

Under such conditions, the fire was again kindled for permanent exhibition quarters. Support was received from newspapers, farm organizations, local businessmen, and the general public. In 1928 some cities began bidding for the annual show.

In 1928, Governor John S. Fisher recommended funding for a permanent exhibition quarters for the Farm Show. The bill passed the House of Representatives, but was tabled in the Senate. But a lump sum was provided by amendment for the construction of additional state buildings. So, even though the funding was not appropriated



Although the Farm Show Complex hosts a wide variety of shows throughout the year, the ornate concrete sculpture adorning the main building says, "agriculture" to all who pass through its doors.

directly for the Farm Show Building, expenses were shared between it and the newly proposed Education Building.

On Oct. 30, 1928, ground was

broken for Lowrey and Green to begin work on the new Farm Show Building. The cornerstone was laid on April 1, 1930 with the dedication being on January 19, 1931—the

opening day of the fifteenth annual show.

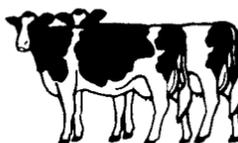
The new structure provided 425,000 square feet of floor space (Turn to Page A30)

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