

Farm Show History Remembered

The Pennsylvania State Farm Show serves as a valuable forum to improve our agricultural industry. This showcase of agriculture recognizes the outstanding achievements of the industry, offers unique location to display new technological advancements, and provides the competitive spirit that helps increase farm production year after year.

William Penn sought to instill the importance of a strong agricultural program in the minds of the early settlers and instigated the first Philadelphia Fair in 1686. Agricultural shows gained an additional boost with the creation of the Philadelphia Society for promotion Agriculture in 1785. A state fair was held in Chester County in 1823 through the combined efforts of the society and farmers around the state

The educational value of expositions and the enthusiasm associated with them spread like wildfire. 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. They conducted the first State Fair that year in Harrisburg, with nearly 20,000 paid admissions.

State fairs were held in different cities throughout 1899, allowing new groups to view the exhibits

The establishment of the Penn State University in 1855 and the State Board of Agriculture in 1876 (which became the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture) helped expand the education-role of those fairs.

Agriculture organizations promoted the idea of an annual winter show when they gathered for their meetings in 1907 in the old Executive Building near the Capitol. There was a small show for milk, a modest show for butter, a show for corn, and exhibits provided by dairy and equipment manufacturers.

Livestock and horticultural groups continued to push for an annual state fair, so Secretary of Agriculture Charles Patton invited agricultural leaders to meet with him in Lancaster in 1916 and the State Farm Show was born. Farmers wanted a show geared toward education, with exhibits and meeting-room facilities.

The original Farm Show Committee set January as the best month suited for the show, a time when farmers are deciding what equipment and supplies to buy for the coming season. Both objectives hold true to this day.

First Show in 1917 --

The first Pennsylvania Farm Show was held in 1917. Called the Pennsylvania, Corn, Fruit, Vegetable, Dairy Products and Wool Show, it featured educational displays and meetings for the various groups.

The event, held in the Emerson Brantingham Building in Harrisburg, attracted about 5,000 visitors and featured \$735 in premiums. By comparison, the 2000 Farm Show offers \$263,841 in premiums and should attract over 300,000 visitors.

Wartime conditions nearly canceled the 1918 show. The federal government seized control of the railroads to prevent freight-train gridlock and the inability to get farm machinery and exhibits in on time posed great uncertainty. Yet the founders of the event were reluctant to surrender the years of work it took to stage the first show. In December 1917 Agriculture Secretary Charles Patton called a meeting that straightened things out and created a formal organization for operating future Farm Shows the State Farm Products Show Committee.

When a formal commission was created by law in 1927 to take over the show administration, the committee and its representatives of the major agricultural association became an advisory panel

The Farm Show has always recognized the importance of our farm youth. The first show had 40 schoolboys competing in corn and potato judging.

Baby beef entries were brought to the growing exposition in 1926, with the first grand champion bringing 25 cents a pound at auction for a total of \$266.59. By contrast, Bill Campbell, chairman of the board for Hoss's Steak and Sea House, paid a whopping \$34,905.30 for the grand champion steer at the 1999 Junior Livestock Sale of Champions.

Momentum was building for construction of a permanent Farm Show site. In 1921, the Legislature approved the State Fair Law, establishing an 11-member commission to lay out a general site plan and obtain options on

property. Although several good options existed, the time was not right. A business recession put a damper the idea and the Legislature quietly dropped the idea of a state fair and fairgrounds.

By 1925, exhibits and meetings were being held in 15 locations. The first 4-H livestock was exhibited in 1926 when the Adams County 4-H Baby Beef Club entered 49 Hereford Steers. Show officials reported that 100 persons per minute were passing throughout the Emerson-Brantingham Building that year, which posed a liability risk to the State Farm Products Show Committee.

New Building Called For --

By 1927, attendance swelled to 50,000, and visitors often waited for hours to enter the exhibit building, prompting calls for expanded facilities. In 1929, the Commission approved a vacant 40 acre site already owned by the state on Harrisburg's northern fringe at Cameron and Maclay Streets. The tract was a cow pasture for the Harrisburg State Hospital.

Nearly 400 bids were submitted and a contract was awarded on October 24, 1929, the same day the New York Stock Exchange collapsed for the first of two times within a week, wiping out billions in investments and throwing America's economy into a tailspin. Had a construction decision been delayed any longer, it's doubtful whether the building would have been built.

A feature of the 1930 Farm Products Show was the naming of three farmers and a farmer's wife to be a Dairy King, Swine King, Potato

King, and Turkey Queen, the earliest commodity royalty. When the show ended, officials estimated attendance to be 80,000.

The new building was dedicated on the opening day of the 15th show in 1931. One of the most distinctive details of the Farm Show building design was a frieze depicting cattle, swine, poultry and other farm animals parading around the upper level of the facade.

The event itself was officially renamed the Pennsylvania State Farm Show, competitive livestock judging was added and more than 30 farm organizations held meetings.

In all, 7,300 competitive exhibits were vying for \$37,000 in cash premiums, and floor space was divided between commercial, competitive and educational use.

With the new building came greater enthusiasm and the number of farm products doubled. With the success of the 1931 show, the Legislature approved the money to build a 15,000 square foot cattle barn and purchase another 27 acres of land for expansion. Opened for the 1932 show, the building raised the total area to 440,000 square feet or fully ten acres under roof.

Large numbers of youth began taking part in the Farm Show. Following a disciplinary problem, the Commission requested that all 4-H club members wear their club hats and all vocational school students wear Future Farmers of America buttons. Now the FFA members all wear their familiar blue jackets and proudly hold their annual convention in the Large Arena.

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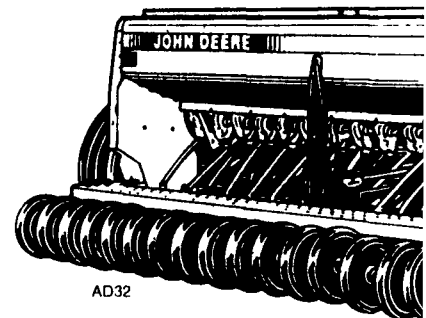
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