

Bigger, Better Farm Show Complex

(Continued from Page E2)

The legislation was amended in 1823 to form the State Agricultural Society. In 1823, Gov. Joseph Hiester approved an act to incorporate the society to meet the "second Saturday of January each year" for the purpose of an "exhibition and cattle show" in successive counties: Montgomery, Chester, Delaware, and Philadelphia.

The first "state fair" was conducted Oct. 22-24, 1823 near Paoli, which included oxen, farming implements, sale of animals, and other events. The sale included more than 100 cattle, 150 sheep, 30 horses, and drew quite a crowd.

Other exhibitions were conducted over the following years in nearby areas. And over the decades, various societies, including the state horticultural society, society for promoting agriculture, and others conducted regular exhibitions.

A real drive to bring the state fair or farm show to Harrisburg was conducted in May of 1850, when an open letter was sent to state farms that spoke about conducting a farmers' convention in Harrisburg "on the third Tuesday of January, 1851" to organize a State Agricultural Society, noted Johnson. A State Fair was organized in Harrisburg on Oct. 22-24, 1851, but because of conflicts with Maryland's state fair, the Pennsylvania Fair was moved forward a week to Oct. 29-31.

The fair location moved about a bit, including Lancaster in 1852, Pittsburgh in 1853, Philadelphia in 1854, and through the years at other locations until Johnstown in 1896-1897.

By 1882, the book notes: "it was decided to develop a permanent location for the institution. A 30-acre tract of land was leased for ten years in Philadelphia. Almost \$80,000 was expended for buildings and other improvements" and very successful fairs were held annually.

Back then, breeder organizations had the most sway about conducting statewide events. Each of them would meet during the wintertime. Up until 1907, they met separately.

But on Jan. 22-25, 1907, a joint meeting of the State Board of Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Livestock Breeders' Association, and the Pennsylvania Dairy Union was conducted in Harrisburg. The first statewide Farm Products Show premiered in Harrisburg, in the old executive building. But it wasn't yet an annual event.

Because of World War I, it was hard to meet on a yearly basis. But the agriculture secretary of the time, C.E. Patton, called a meeting in December 1917 and announced the appointment of a permanent executive committee. This was the birth of the "state Farm Products Show Committee," until the creation of the State Products Show Commission in 1927.

The meeting of 1917 proved a turning point, and 1917 could be considered the beginning of the Farm Show we know today. (Opening day was Jan. 23, a Tuesday.)

In 1917, the farm show attendance was 5,000 with premiums of \$735. By 1927, the show had grown to a point where it "had attracted 50,000 people," Johnson noted.

Premiums of \$7,000 were paid.

The show had various names up to this point. The first show was the "Pennsylvania Corn, Fruit, Vegetable, Dairy Products, and Wool Show." Then it was called, after 1917, the "Pennsylvania Farm Products Show," then the "Pennsylvania State Farm Products Show" or the "State Farm Products Show." In 1931, it was officially named the "Pennsylvania Farm Show."

The first few state shows were conducted in the Emerson-Brantingham building in Harrisburg, noted Johnson. From there, it began to expand, and was conducted in many other locations in the city. Space became a problem.

So Governor John S. Fisher provided for the construction of the Farm Show Building in the budget for 1929-1931. Original cost of the building with furnishings: \$1.44 million. The ground was broken on Oct. 30, 1929. The cornerstone was laid on April 1, 1930, and the building was dedicated Monday evening, Jan. 19, 1931 — the opening day of the 15th annual show, Johnson noted.

Additions were completed with expansions of 15,000 square feet to the rear until and the purchase of an additional 27 acres of ground. In 1936, the Farm Show Building covered 440,000 square feet, all under one roof.

(In contrast, with new construction in 2002, a total of 359,000 square feet of exhibit space was added, bringing the total for the 2003 Farm Show to more than 1 million square feet.)

Horace L. Mann was Farm Show director.

Heavy snows greeted visitors on the first day of the 1936 Farm Show, noted Cresswell (what else is new?) But attendance stayed high.

At the 1938 show, Cresswell noted, ground was broken for a new Large Arena building by

(Turn to Page E4)

First 50 Years Of The Pennsylvania Farm Show

In 1966, the Pennsylvania Farm Show Commission published a book, "The First Fifty Years of the Pennsylvania Farm Show," compiled by Donald M. Cresswell.

Governor at the time was William W. Scranton and Leland H. Bull was secretary of agriculture.

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Free admission was advertised at the opening of the 1939 show, where it was dedicated. Photo courtesy Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

Farm Show Traces Its Colorful History



For more than 86 years, Farm Show has undergone many changes. Officials believe the changes at the 2003 Farm Show mirror the biggest changes since the Large Arena was constructed in 1938. These are three books sanctioned by Farm Show that describe a colorful and surprising history of events.

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