

## The History of The Martin County Fair

The Martin County Fair, regarded as one of the finest county fairs in the state of Minnesota, has evolved from humble beginnings in the mid 1800's to a major area attraction. The following is a brief historical account of how the Martin County Fair has evolved over the years. However, it must be noted that in some instances, the historical documentation available provides conflicting information.

According to one account from the September 29, 1916, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*, the Martin County Fair of 1865 was held in a room in the court house. The exhibits were limited to a few pumpkins and cabbages, some of which were eaten by a cow that got loose. The first agricultural fair was said to have taken place the following year, 1866, and was considered by local people of that time to be a significant improvement over the previous fair of 1865. The fair was conducted without any planned organization until 1869 when the Martin County Agricultural Society was formed. In 1873, a committee was appointed to consider the purchase of fairgrounds. In 1877, the Martin County Agricultural Society obtained 20 acres for that purpose, and in 1878, an additional four acres was purchased for \$100.00. Each year thereafter, improvements were made on the site.

However, according to Albert L. Ward in his newspaper, the *Independent*, the first Martin County Fair was held in 1870. In reference to Mr. Ward's account, those fairs held prior to that date were not "Martin County Fairs," but rather "Fairmont Fairs," and served merely as forerunners to the Martin County Fair. An interesting event at the second county fair which, according to Ward, was held on the school grounds involved a "free for all fight" which was that fair's biggest attraction. Ward's account stated that a "well known old settler was knocked down so hard that the top of his head was the first part of his anatomy to hit the ground. The fight caused great excitement and was considered to have been a splendid county fair."

The fair of 1884 involved a number of interesting events, one of which was a 100 yard foot race. Entrants were blindfolded, and they used wheel-barrows. First place was a prize of \$3.00, and second place was \$2.00. Regarding the safety of the fairgrounds, a night watchman was on duty to protect the exhibits and a "good police force" was in attendance. Also, no promiscuous driving was allowed on the track in the afternoon until the close of races.

The fair of 1896 was successful despite rainy conditions. Some interesting "Facts of The Fair" are as follows: Saturday's attendance was estimated to be 3,000; as usual, Judge Livermore had the largest variety of apples comprising fifteen different kinds;

Wm. Suter's big watermelon weighing forty-seven pounds was an eye-opener; Fred Houseman's freak sheep, thought by some to be a new breed, was a corker; as well as many other accounts mentioned in the September 18, 1896, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*.

Some events from the 1904 Martin County Fair included the Taggert family of acrobats and Professor Burton's high diving dog. Also, Treasurer Sharpe did not have the usual struggle with privileges, as he simply turned down the "fakirs" and "grafters," those who at that time would take advantage of fairgoers. Regarding that issue, the following was stated in the September 16, 1904, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*: "There was not a game or fakir of any description on the fair grounds and if any man lost his money it was because he was so foolish as to bet on the races."

The 1911 fair showed annual membership tickets totaling \$111.00, general admissions, \$729.00, children \$59.45, and concessions of \$85.50. One extremely popular feature of the 1911 fair was the "Old Settlers" headquarters where pioneers registered, met, and exchanged experiences. However, unfavorable weather conditions hindered the fair causing a carnival company to cancel their commitment leaving only a merry-go-round and the Lenny Burton menagerie for entertainment.

In 1949, John Livermore headed the movement toward a "Free Gate Fair." Although unsuccessful in his first attempts, he continued his intent to "clean out the deadwood," as he put it, on the fair board. Newspaper accounts indicate that after the changeover to a "Free Gate Fair," attendance and participation greatly improved.

Although historical documentation is somewhat conflicting, it appears that the Martin County Fair was held primarily at the intersection of highways 15 and 16, the current location of the Five Lakes Centre, until 1964. In 1964, this site was sold to Madsen Enterprises, Inc., of Mankato for \$275,000.00 for the proposed building of the Fair Mall shopping center. The 1965 fair was planned for their new site on the west side of Fairmont which was promoted as being "bigger and better" according to the fair board of that time.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

HF-177

*Martin County Agricultural Society.*

37th

FAIRMONT,  
MINN.

1902  
ANNUAL FAIR

September 24, 25, 26 and 27.

PASS

B. H. WARD, PRES.

E. F. WADE, SECY.

*Complimentary*  
*& Letor Cedar Lake Ripples & Lodge*

# MARTIN COUNTY FREE GATE FAIR

SEPTEMBER 13 - 14 - 15 - 16



The Fastest Growing  
Fair In The U. S.

1949

50,000 attendance

1950

70,000 attendance

1951

OUR GOAL

100,000 attendance

Martin County's big agricultural and industrial exposition for Southern Minnesota and Northern Iowa.

## 12 — LARGE BUILDINGS AND TENTS — 12

Filled with Agricultural and Industrial exhibits; including a circus tent housing the very latest in a builders-appliance show crowded with suggestions for homes. If you are thinking of building or remodeling, these exhibits are a "MUST". See the large open-air truck exhibit, and the farm machinery exhibit will be under flood lights for the convenience of night visitors.

## 2 — CARNIVALS — 2

WOLF'S GREATER SHOW will furnish a large, super Midway composed of Wolf's attractions and the rides from another carnival

## 7 — GREAT GRANDSTAND SHOWS — 7

Showing at all performances, afternoon and evening.

## THE FAMOUS STAPLES RODEO

THURSDAY NIGHT—Famous Staples Rodeo with the addition of a childrens rodeo. Free Shetland pony to the lucky boy or girl under 12 years of age to enter parade in front of grandstand. Also five free watches.

FRIDAY, SATURDAY and SUNDAY—Famous Staples Rodeo, afternoon and evening, 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. In addition, each saddle club within 60 miles of Fairmont may enter 5 riders from their community to compete in each of 5 wild steer riding contests for cash awards.

SUNDAY NIGHT SHOW ONLY—Gigantic queen contest for \$100.

GRANDSTAND ADMISSION—\$1.00 plus 20 cents tax. Children under 12, 75 cents plus 15 cents tax. Also a big section of bleacher seats 50 cents and 10 cents tax.

Last year's rodeo shows were so good, and thrilling, many fair visitors attended as many as 3 or 4 of these outstanding shows at about half the price others charge.

KSUM will broadcast every day from the fair grounds.

## EXTRA ATTRACTION

FRIDAY afternoon and evening the competing Saddle Queens will ride in a parade before the Grandstand for your applause which will help the judges pick the Queen Sunday evening.

BIG FREE PARADE at 12:30 Saturday afternoon on Fairmont uptown streets composed of Staples Rodeo and Saddle Club riders from neighboring saddle clubs.

All Saddle Club paraders will sit in the reserved guest section of the grandstand as guests of the Staples Rodeo and the Martin County Free Gate Fair.

Anyone Interested In The

Above Mentioned Contests

Address: MARTIN CO.

AGRICULT'L SOCIETY

John S. Livermore, Sec'y.

Fairmont, Minnesota

