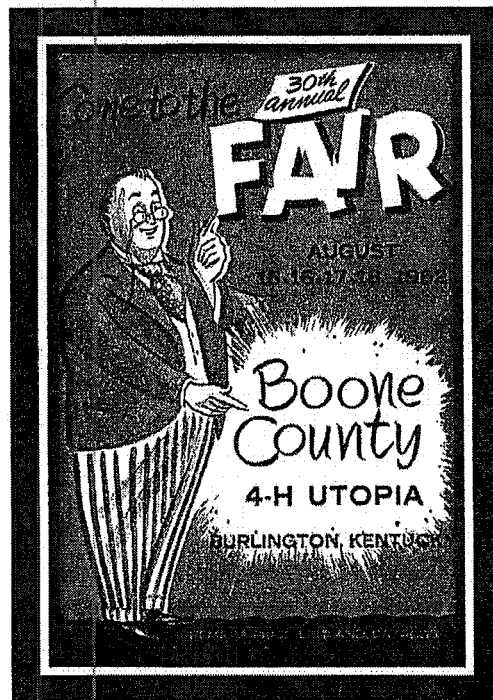


The History of the Boone County 4-H and Utopia Fair



A Local "Fair-y" Tale of "Making the Best Better"

By Paula Rudicill Vaske

The Boone County 4-H and Utopia Fair has enjoyed existence for over 75 years. During that time the fair has grown from a one day occurrence to an annual weeklong happening. In the state of Kentucky the Boone County 4-H and Utopia Fair is known as one of the oldest, largest, and most successful fairs in the state. People wait eagerly for their favorite event each year. Exhibitors work on projects in hopes that they will win the premium and more importantly the pride that goes with each blue ribbon. The first fair was a humble event, but it planted a seed that would grow. With each growth the members of the fairboard had to research, experiment, and evaluate, to decide what direction the fair should advance. They have continued with that formula into the present times. The end result has always been tweaked so that each year promises a next time.

The History of Fairs in Boone County

The certainty of the date of the first fair held in Boone County has not been acquired. In her monograph *Old County Fairs Held in Florence, Kentucky*, Mrs. Elizabeth Goodridge Nestor opens her document with a story of a relative preparing to go to the fair.

The exact date of the Florence Fair known as the "old" Florence Fair is unknown but I know it existed in 1845 because my father's sister Catherine Goodridge was dressed to go to this fair and her escort Mr. Gaines Robinson was at her home to take her when she fell dead. Our family Bible states she died in 1845. (Nestor, 1)

In 1854 a fair was organized under the Boone County Agricultural Association. It was a four day event featuring events commonly associated

with the fair of modern times (home economics, equestrian competitions, and livestock judging). The fair was known as the Boone County Fair. This event was reorganized by the next year under the Northern Kentucky Agricultural Society changing its name to the Florence Fair. This organization lasted for over 20 years. The last fair was held in 1881. The fair officials hoped to move to a different location and tried to raise money to do such, but for whatever reason this did not happen. A few years later efforts were made to resurrect the fair. An excerpt in *The Daily Commonwealth* dated September 24th, 1884 alludes to this:

It is hoped that the new society will not fall into the errors and indiscretions which wrecked the former association. In the first place the stockholders should put a board composed almost exclusively of young men into office (The Daily Commonwealth, September 24th, 1884).

In 1895 this fair was reorganized and a new fairgrounds and buildings were built in Florence. The North Kentucky Agricultural Association was the name of the organization. This fair lasted until 1932. The Depression was in full swing and many such fairs were having a tough time making a profit. The association voted to not continue with having the fair.

In addition to the North Kentucky Fair there was another fair in Boone County. It was organized under the Harvest Home Association, and was called "Boone County Harvest Home. This fair started in 1882 as a one day event held at Parlor Grove, Kentucky. The Harvest Home grounds were located on Limaburg Road. Besides hosting an annual fair, these grounds

were available for picnics, political gatherings, dances, and baseball games, all for a fee charged by the association. The event held by Harvest Home was a small one day event, which was called an "annual meeting" instead of a fair. The last such meeting was held in 1936, it was the golden anniversary of the meeting.

The Beginnings of the 4-H and Utopia Fair

Established in 1915, Boone County had a strong 4-H program by the late 1920's. *The Boone County Recorder* list many events for the community clubs on a weekly basis. Events were well advertised and well attended. Members of the club were encouraged to work on their projects and live by their motto "make the best better." In 1930 Boone County formed a Utopia Club for adults who wanted to continue with the values and the education that the 4-H had offered them as kids. This was the second such club in Kentucky and the nation. In the early 1930's many profit fairs had closed up shop. 4-H members were having a difficult time finding a place to compete with their projects. 4-H districts started to experiment with having district club fairs. In 1931 Lexington held a fair for all the surrounding districts to compete in. Many Boone County 4-H members entered their projects in this competition, but were unable to actually attend the fair.

By 1932 the Utopia Club had grown substantially. The idea of a council was discussed and in the August 11th edition of the *Boone County Recorder* all members of the 4-H and Utopia Clubs were invited to gather for

a picnic at Split Rock. During the picnic an election was to be held to select members of the 4-H and Utopia Clubs to be part of a council. The purpose of this council would be to discuss problems facing the county clubs. This council proposed to the North Kentucky Fairboard to have a day that would be specifically for 4-H members and the Utopia Clubs. The 4-H Council would be responsible for the judging of their events, as well as organizing the day. Facing the reality that the fair was financially struggling, the fairboard agreed.

Friday has been officially set aside as 4-H Club Day at North Kentucky Fair at Florence, according to County Agent H. R. Forkner. All 4-H Club members and leaders on presenting their membership cards will be given free admission (Boone County Recorder, August 25th, 1932)

This Club Day was the first Boone County 4-H and Utopia Fair.

A New Beginning

As noted previously, 1932 was the last year for the North Kentucky Fair, but its end meant a new beginning. In the following year the 4-H and Utopia council began to collaborate with plans for another event. The concept of this fair was to be different than those of the earlier fairs. Instead of trying to make a profit, the goal of this fair would be to provide a venue for the clubs to compete and for families to gather for a fun day. A board was elected to organize the event. Originally the fair was known as the 4-H North Kentucky 1 Day Fair. The fairboard faced dilemmas such as finding judges, premium money, concessions, and advertisement. It was also

decided to hold meetings in concordance with parliamentary procedures and officers were elected. There was a discussion on charging a 10 cent admission fee, but the board decided to keep the fair free. Advertising was a large concern of all members, Mr. R. V. Lents was appointed as advertising manager (a position that he held for 46 years). The fair was held at the Florence fairgrounds where the old North Kentucky Fair had been. The fairboard bartered and negotiated with vendors in order to keep the prices as low as possible. If a price could not be agreed upon the fairboard did without that particular item.

Little is known about the success of the 1933 fair. What is known is that the fairboard started out with a balance of \$33.50 and was able to come out of the fair with a balance of \$26.16. The premiums for that year amounted to \$26.75 (Fairboard minutes, Treasurers report from 1933 fair). Because the fairboard was not trying to accomplish a profit, the fair had been a success.

Special Events from the 1933 Fair

Broadest Grin	Speaking Contest	Baby Show
Dirtiest Faced Boy	Fat Man's Race	Biggest Feet
Three Legged Race	Club Singing	Oldest Person
Fiddlers Contest	Women's Nail Driving	

The entire above contest were closed to Boone County residents.

The Growth of the Fair

The early fairboard was as much of a 4-H council as it was a fairboard. The board helped to organize rally days, assisted in sending members to

camp, gave suggestions in improving entries, and awarded scholarships to outstanding members as well as organizing the fair. The fair continued to grow after 1933 as did the 4-H and Utopia programs. The fairboard agreed to govern the fair under the same rulings that the state used. The 1934 fair paid out \$38.75 in premiums and ended with a balance of \$43.03 (Treasurers report from 1934). There were over 2000 in attendance. The fair had become known as the 4-H and Utopia Club Free Fair.

By 1935 the fairboard had decided that the Florence grounds were not an ideal location to hold the fair. The amphitheater was considered an unsafe structure. Harvest Home would be the new location of the fair. It is unknown how much was paid in 1935 for the grounds, but in 1936 the fairboard paid Harvest Home ten dollars for the day and provided their own janitor for cleaning up the location (July 13, 1936).

Community support for the fair was growing. Several clubs and organizations contributed money to offset the cost of the fair. For example, the Boone County Jersey Cattle Club offered fifty dollars to be used for premiums for the dairy cattle show. Sears Roebuck and Company sponsored the canning awards. A gas stove was donated for use during the fair from Jansen's Hardware Company in exchange for an exhibit. Motch Jewelers donated a diamond ring, as well as many other donations from local businesses (July 20th, August 17th, and September 11th, 1936). Some of the special events that were added to the schedule included a slipper kicking

contest (which replaced the husband calling contest), whistling contest for men and boys, pet parade, and fat women's race (contestants had to weigh at least 175 pounds). The fairboard was able to double the premiums for the 1936 fair.

In 1937 the first catalogue was printed. Catalogues are extremely important to fairs. They contain the schedule, copies of the rules, names of superintendents, sponsorships, and premiums. The creation of this catalogue is proof of the faith the fairboard held for the success of the organization. For a price of \$123.25 five hundred posters and 750 catalogues were printed (July, 29th 1937).

By 1938 the fair had become a community wide event. A county picnic was advertised as part of the festivities. The fairboard decided to hire an off duty patrolman to procure the fair at a cost of \$12.00 for the day. The fair was still being held at Harvest Home, but the fairboard was ready to move forward with plans of purchasing a permanent location for the fair. In 1939 a committee of the fairboard was discussing not only use of the Harvest Home location for the annual fair, but also purchasing the grounds. Negotiations could not be reached for an agreed upon rate for the 1939 fair, so it was held at the Burlington School grounds. Negotiations for acquiring the grounds permanently could not be reached either. The 1940 fair was the last fair to be held at the Harvest Home grounds. In 1941 the fair was again held at the

Burlington School grounds, but a new home was on the horizon. All that was needed was some money.

Burlington Fairgrounds

A committee had been searching for a new location to have the 4-H and Utopia since 1939. Thirty acres outside the town of Burlington on Idlewild Road was found. The funds needed to purchase the grounds were three thousand dollars. Members of the 4-H and Utopia clubs as well as members of the community pledged assistance. A total of 345 individuals contributed to the fairground fund (Boone County Library, Boone County Fair Collection, #144). The amount donated equaled \$3105.20, the pasture on the property was rented for \$15.20, and scrap iron was sold for \$10.71, added with the current amount the fairboard had in hand totaled \$4531.19. (Fairboard minutes, October 8th, 1942) In addition to the land purchase the fairboard also had a lake, barn, and refreshment stand built. The lake cost \$977.63. Some additional money had to be borrowed from a fairboard member to finish the building projects (this debt was paid off in 1945).

Moving Forward

After the purchase of the grounds in 1942 the fair was on its way to becoming a community staple. In the next few years the fair would continue to grow with some interesting events occurring in the midst of this growth. For example, in 1943 it was decided that all cash premiums be paid in defense stamps. Refreshments that year had to be rationed due to World

War II, and the catalogue was titled "Food for Victory Edition". The 1944 fair had to be postponed because of an outbreak of infantile paralysis, otherwise known as polio (although an edition of the *Boone County Recorder* blames the delay on a busy tobacco season, [Boone County Recorder, August 17th, 1944]). The fair was moved to mid-September. Previously in 1942 baby contests were to be judged on health in as an alternative to beauty because of polio outbreaks. A Red Cross Nurse became the official judge of baby shows until 1949. In 1944 the fairboard also voted to have an admission fee to help offset the care and maintenance of the grounds. Adults were charged twenty-five cents to get in. The advertisements for 1944 included bumper strips and radio ads. In 1948 the fair was incorporated.

Too Much Fun for Just One Day

The success of the one day fair made it possible for the fair to lengthen the amount of time that the fair occurred. In 1947 the fairboard voted to have a two day and one night fair. In 1952 the fair was held for 3 days and 1 night. In 1960 the fair was 4 days long. In 1966 the fair was held Monday and Tuesday night, and all day and night Wednesday through Saturday. In 1968 all day Tuesday was added. In 1974 the fair was to go all day and night Monday through Saturday. In 1975 an "Open to the World Tractor Pull" was added making the fair last for 6 days and 7 nights.

With the addition of more days the fairboard had to constantly reorganize the schedule. Events had to be moved to make room for new

events. New events had to be tried and evaluated to keep the fair fun and fresh. Some events were simply tweaked to make room for more participants, like the baby show. Originally the baby show was for babies 18 months and younger. Other classes were eventually added so that children up to 5 years old could compete. Many attractions were added in years to come. Here are some of the changes that occurred over the years:

1947 Horse and pony show
Rides were added

1957 Beauty Pageant - was originally handled by the Boone County Junior Chamber of Commerce

1960 Farm Tractor Pull - for tractors used on farm

1975 Open to the World Tractor Pull - tractors specifically designed for pulling

1981 Sale of Champions begins

1999 Demolition Derby

With each new event other similar events followed. In conjunction with more events being added more buildings and permanent structures had to be built. The horse and pony shows grew so that two rings were needed for contest. Horse barns had to be built to accommodate all the animals. The beauty pageant prompted other pageants to form, a teen contest, little mister and miss, and the newest contest, a sweetheart pageant. The tractor pulls triggered the building of a track and eventually the motor sports arena for the demolition derby. All of these buildings, tracks, rings and contest demand constant maintenance. The fairboard is constantly acquiring funds

for painting, repairing, rebuilding, improving, and maintaining the fairgrounds. For most projects the fairboard bids out the job to obtain the best price.

Additional Funds

Throughout the years of the fair the fairboard has implemented different ways to raise additional funds for covering expenses. Once the Burlington grounds were purchased, there were several opportunities to use the grounds to make money. For example the pasture was rented to farmers for their horses or cattle. After the lake was built it was stocked with fish. Passes were sold to fishermen on a daily, seasonal, or annual basis. The manure from the stables was sold. The fairgrounds were leased to organizations and other groups for picnics, reunions, and meetings. The tobacco base was raised by a group of boys and the profits were split with the board. Many private organizations leased the fairgrounds for their own shows throughout the years. Several times the fairgrounds were used for traveling circuses. Once, a salesman tried to convince the fairboard to sell light bulbs for a fundraising project. For many years on every third Sunday the fairgrounds have been home to a very large antique flea market. All of these events had to be approved by a watchful fairboard.

All of the additional funds when added to the proceeds from the fair go back into the fair. The fair has increased in size over the years to make more room for growth. In 1957 twelve acres were purchased for \$4200 (Fairboard

minutes, May 24th, 1957). Six acres were purchased in 1965. Throughout its duration the fair has continued to modernize and expand.

Evolution of the Fairboard

During that time of massive growth the fairboard had changed from its origins. It joined many associations that aid in mainstreaming similar events. The fair joined the Kentucky Association of Fairs and Horse Shows in the 1950's and several fairboard members have been the president of the association. Another change to assist in mainstreaming the fair is the use of the Danish System of Judging for entries adopted in 1966, enabling 4-H projects to advance to the state fair.

The board originally operated as a 4-H council as well as a fairboard. During the 1950's and 60's the growth of the fair became the primary focus of the board and eventually a separate 4-H council was formed. The size of the fairboard increased. In 1933 there were 6 members, at present there are more than 30 members. During the years of the early fair one member would handle an event or operation, now whole committees are responsible for decisions with different factions of the fair.

A Community Event

It has taken hard work and dedication for a non-profit organization to survive over 75 years. The fair has always been billed as a family event, with wholesome values. In celebration of the 50 year anniversary in 1982, *The Kentucky Post* interviewed R.V. Lents concerning the fair. He discusses

what makes the Boone County 4-H and Utopia Fair different from other fairs he had known:

They had what you call hootchy-kootchy shows and everything else. But our fair is a clean fair. We not even allow intoxicating liquor on the grounds. The fair is run on a Christian basis. No fair board member gets paid. Every board member knows his job and he does it, (Kentucky Post, August 2nd, 1982).

All those who serve on the fairboard only have the smiles of the fair patrons for their salary. Fairboard members are constantly updating, comparing, and measuring fair events to keep the fair fresh. This is how the fair started and this is how it will continue.

It takes hundreds of volunteers to make the fair a success. One patron favorite, the greased pig scramble, which only lasts about 10 minutes, requires one announcer, two pig handlers, four judges, and a very confused pig to be a success. It is because of the commitment to a local community event that the Boone County 4-H and Utopia Fair has perpetuated. Again quoting R.V. Lents

It's not only a fair...It's a homecoming. Many people who once lived in Boone County come back for the fair. You can see more people there in one day than if you tried to run around and visit all of your friends (Kentucky Post, August 2nd, 1982).

The fair has remained true to its roots, promoting education through the 4-H, keeping the event family oriented, gathering the community together, and helping people have a good time. The motto of the early 4-H of "making the best better" has held firm for all those who make the fair happen. The fair is a true local "fair-y" tale.

Appendix

Danish Judging System - The Danish System is a method of evaluating entries or exhibits in a particular class contest according to the standards developed for that class or contest. The entries, exhibits, or contestants are evaluated and arranged into groups for recognition of their achievement based upon how close the exhibit meets the pre-established standards. Exhibits which meet all the criteria are given a blue award. The top three awards would be chosen out of the best of the best.

Defense Stamps -- Defense stamps were sold for 25 cents, 50 cents, and one dollar. As stamps were collected they were pasted into a book. Books could be traded for twenty-five dollar war bonds. Both bonds and stamps helped to fund the war effort.

History of the 4-H -- The idea of 4-H clubs stemmed from the efforts to teach new techniques of agriculture to farm families. Often the older generation was unwilling to try to methods, so the idea was to encourage children to have projects utilizing the new ideas. The first clubs formed in Ohio; by 1909 the first club was started in Kentucky by Professor George Roberts.

Polio -- In the 1920's until the 1950's the hot weather of the later summer months was considered "polio season." Polio was commonly known as infantile paralysis. Polio was considered an epidemic during the timespan noted. At its worse polio can cause irreversible paralysis, often in the legs. Jonas Salk is credited with the first polio vaccine tested in 1952.

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