

Highland County Fair History

Compiled by: Mary Wharton, LaVern Holbrook and Dave Stratton

Prior to the 1930's, several fairs were held in Highland County. Earlier fairs had been held in Rainsboro, Greenfield, Hillsboro, and in the southern part of the county at Roberts Park. In the thirties, there was an effort to revive the county fair. In 1937, the Highland County Agricultural Society held a fair in Greenfield, September 21, 22, and 23. In 1938, August 4, 5, and 6, a fair was held on the site of Roberts Park, currently the state roadside park located on US Route 62. In 1939, the fair was held Sept. 27, 28, 29 and 30 on the streets of Hillsboro. The fair effort was placed on hold during the WW II years. In March, 1946, a group of concerned citizens of Highland County formed a "Grounds Committee for Fairgrounds Campaign." They made up the committee with a representative chairman from each of the seventeen townships in the county and any other people interested in starting a county fair in Highland County. In June of 1946, this group of men organized and formed the "Highland County Agricultural Society." They sold Society Memberships for \$1.00 a person. There was an old existing fairground, owned by a local businessman, consisting of twenty acres. It was rough and covered with several trees, a couple of old buildings in need of much repair, and part of a grandstand. There had not been a fair held here since the depression and WW II. The owner offered the use of these grounds temporarily to restart the fair. In September, 1947, they held the first fair, all exhibits under tents. Through 1947 and 1948 there was much discussion and efforts made by the society to buy another parcel of land for a permanent fair site. Due to a lack of funds, this was never carried out. They eventually purchased the old fairgrounds consisting of 20 acres for \$3,000. This is the present site of the fair grounds. After much bull dozing and dirt moving, tree removal and demolition of the old buildings (from which they saved the lumber for future use), the ground was ready for new buildings. One of the first buildings erected was in 1949. The Ohio National Guard approached the Society's board to build a 52' x 128' cement block building at the south end of the grounds for equipment storage. They would make this building available for fair use during fair week. In the early 1950's, with help from many people in the county, the society held the first Beef Bar-B-Que. Since then they have held this event annually to raise money for improvements to the buildings and fairgrounds.

In 1955, the board built the first livestock barn, a 78' x 144' foot dairy barn. They also built a fair secretary's office that year. In 1956, two barns were constructed for swine and sheep exhibitors. 1957 saw the "Highland County Grange" build a concrete block Grange Building for their meetings, complete with the first kitchen facilities on the grounds. The Grange served lunch and meals during fair week until the building was paid for. The 4-H Clubs of Highland County built a concrete block building next to the Grange building with a lobby connecting the two together. The Grange added to these buildings by building a Grange Hall and restrooms onto the south end of the original buildings. The Grange Hall is still used as an exhibition area for fair exhibits. In 1958, the first Merchants display building was built, a 56' x 128' concrete block structure. Many of the local merchants prepaid their space rental to help finance its construction, and it was rented for off-season storage to raise additional funds throughout the year. Later, a similar building was built north of the merchants building to house the arts and crafts and flower displays. In 1959, the Hillsboro Rotary Club built a ticket office at the front gate. The Hillsboro Rotary Club has manned the

gates for the Highland County Fair since 1947 and continues to perform this function yearly. During this period the County Farm Implement dealers erected an entertainment pavilion on the grounds to accommodate singing groups, the Queen contest, and demonstrations during fair week. Dairy and beef wash racks were also constructed in 1959. In 1960, a horse barn was added to the grounds. The board purchased property to add to the original grounds. During the 1960's there was an effort by several people to move the September fair dates back into August, but this was never accomplished and the fair continues to be held during Labor Day week. In 1962, a 60' x 140' covered Show Ring was added to the grounds. During this era our local county horse club, "The Trail Breakers," built a meeting building and horse show arena on the grounds. The building served double duty as a club meeting place and food service booth during the fair. In 1963, a set of restrooms complete with running water were constructed. In 1966, the Hillsboro First Methodist Church constructed a permanent food booth. This building was used by several organizations to serve food throughout fair week for over thirty years before it was razed. In 1968, a Barrow Barn was built on the grounds. In 1976, the second clear span metal frame building was constructed on the grounds. This is used for Junior Fair displays. Shortly after this, a second beef barn was built to help house the increasing number of beef projects that were being exhibited. In the 70's, the board moved a small house onto the grounds to use as a secretary's office, and the old office was turned over to WSRW Radio as a broadcast booth. In the late 80's, a new broadcast barn was built for WSRW. During fair week WSRW broadcasts from the fair daily from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. In the 80's, the Highland County Dairy Goat Club built a new livestock barn to house the goats during the fair. Also during the 80's a new display building was erected, named after W.G. (Mike) Wharton, who served as the secretary of the fair board for 30 years. Mike also served as President of the Ohio Fair Managers Association. The 90's saw new restrooms constructed, and the grounds fenced in with chain link fence. A new 64' x 104' multi-purpose building was constructed, used for livestock shows and entertainment. The old entertainment pavilion was remodeled by the local Garden Club into a Floral Exhibit Hall.

Throughout the history of the Highland County Fair, one of our best successes has been the growth of our Junior Fair. This has provided an opportunity for our young people to participate and to grow into the leaders we need for the future in agriculture, business, government, community, and in the home. The grounds and facilities are used throughout the year by schools, church groups, rodeos, tractor pulls, cancer walk-a-thons, auctions, horse shows, and many other events. In recent years the Southern Ohio Draft Horse Association has been holding their annual show at the fairgrounds in the last part of September. This has provided a look back in time, when the horse was used on the farm for the power to do farm work. The fairgrounds have grown from the original 20 acres and temporary tents to more than sixty acres and twenty-five permanent buildings. These improvements have been made with help from the Highland County Commissioners, the Highland County Engineers, and many citizens of the county with both financial support and physical labor; also, supporting organizations such as the Rotary Club, Lions Club, Pork and Beef Producers, Dairy Associations, Dairy Goat Clubs, Poultry Producers' School, FFA, FHA, Vocational Agriculture, Industrial Arts, 4-H, OSU Extension Service, Grange, churches, the schools and teachers, and many more organizations and individuals. It takes the whole county to make a county fair! Compiled By: Mary Wharton, Lavern Holbrook, and Dave Stratton