

Some History of the Fort Cobb Fair

As the Scat has made dizzy a multitude of kids and adults, my first memory of the Fort Cobb Fair was riding the roller coaster that once sat in this spot. I must have been four or five years old which puts my first roller coaster ride around 1967 or 1968. I recall fun times at the Fort Cobb Fair, including spinning in the Tilt-A-Whirl my freshman year in college in 1981. This may very well have been the last year for it to run. When I married into the Weaver family, I learned about their deep love, strong connection, and great commitment to the Fort Cobb Fair. As the 80th anniversary of the Fort Cobb Fair and Parade is about to be celebrated, I spoke with several individuals to gather as much history and details as I could about the rides, the booths, and all those who created this rich experience for so many for the past 80 years.

I learned that most of the oldest existing rides were discovered by Ray Metz on a trip to south Oklahoma to buy cotton seed. Ray and his wife, Vesta, had stopped at a café for lunch when he spotted a "For Sale" sign in front of a family-owned amusement park. According to their daughter, Fairy (Metz) Holdge, he returned to Fort Cobb and went straight to the Washita Valley Bank to get a loan. He then rallied members of the Fort Cobb community to go pick them up. According to Fairy, her daddy's favorite ride to operate was the roller coaster and he was known to "gun it at just the right time" to give its riders a thrill. It was probably Mr. Metz that gave me that first roller ride.

One of the best sources for information about the fair rides was Terry White. His father, Ed White, was the owner of the local house moving company. Terry said he was in 9th or 10th grade (either 1966 or 1967) when his dad took his house-moving crew (my father-in-law Carl Weaver among them) down to Sulphur, Oklahoma, a day ahead of time with his trucks and gin poles to dismantle the carnival rides for their trip to Fort Cobb. Ray Metz, Calvin Marshall, and Glenn Milwee took their cattle trucks.

"The Rotary Club fed us breakfast at the Boll Weevil Café. Some FFA boys and I drove down to help," recalled Terry. "Freddie Reinking, owner of the Fort Cobb Locker Plant, took barbeque and fed us all lunch." He told which rides were brought from Sulphur to Fort Cobb that day, listing the following rides: Merry-Go-Round, Ferris wheel, pony carts, Tilt-A-Whirl, a train, and a roller coaster. The following day, all of Fort Cobb business owners and members of the community converged to reassemble the rides.

Letha (Turney) Wilson said that the Big Jennie is one of the oldest rides. This ride first stood by the highway in the west part of the fair grounds. Letha recalled, "There were little cast iron cars which were later replaced by different cars." She remembered the airplane ride in the original rides. The airplanes were made of airplane fuel tanks, corroborating that the age of the first decade of the Fort Cobb Fair was in the 1940's. Letha affirmed that most of the rides were purchased in the mid 1960's. She mentioned the wooden horses for the Merry-Go-Round in that batch of rides. They were in some disrepair but still quite valuable. She said that Robert Weidenmeier (of Weidenmaier and Son Department Store) happened on someone back east who replaced the wooden horses and animals with cast aluminum and donated an additional \$10,000 to the fair which paid off the entire loan. Sisters Grace Lee (Gilliland) Shelton and JoNelle (Gilliland) Courtney put the most recent artwork on the horses, and the pony carts. Jeff and Kami Franklin of J and K Auto Collision Repair put the most recent coat of paint and artwork on the little cars. The latter two of the three rides are put into storage every year.

The Merry-Go Round now sits under a metal cover built by Weaver Construction, replacing the wooden cover built in the late 1960's. I sat in the truck with a 90-year-old, Carl Weaver as we watched them take the Merry-Go-Round's wooden roof down. My father-in-law talked of that day in 1967 when he helped Ed White bring it and the other rides to Fort Cobb – how they built that cover for it and for the Tilt-A-Whirl. Carl passed away just a few days later. My husband Robert has helped to get the rides, booths, and rounds ready almost every year for the past 40 years of our marriage. We and our sons work rides and booths. This year, I helped the Fort Cobb Broxton High School Art Department paint the Ferris wheel, the pony cart ride's base and poles, and the Little Jennie. As I grinded the paint down on these three rides for their newest coat, I marveled at all the layers and colors below what we were about to add, taking a few pictures, and wishing others could see it as I saw it right then.

From Fairy Holdge, I learned that the ladies of nearby OSU Extension home demonstration clubs of South Pioneer, Crescent, and Foster operated the early food stand. She said they served hamburgers, cheeseburgers, and a whole lot of homemade pies. She added that Bruna Farmer did the cooking all three nights as the men bragged about eating three, even four hamburgers at one setting, and asking who was cooking those burgers back in there. At present, the Fort Cobb-Broxton Sophomore and Junior classes (plus parents and teachers) run the main food concession as their key fundraiser. The FC-B Athletic Department makes the cotton candy, popcorn, and snow cones in another stand to the north.

Richard Finney recalled how, back in the day, Washita Valley Bank employees ran the bingo stand and the business owners ran the booths. He said his favorite booth was operated by J and B Supply. You shot an arrow to hit the balloon and win the bear. He said there was also a booth called Honest John's where one put their money on a wheel and gave it a spin. This was a favorite of many men in the community. Richard said, "Many good memories of some that are no longer with us."

Jamie (Kusel) Pittman recalls, "I remember Jim (her dad) and the gang whooping and hollering and having the best time" at Honest John's. Judy Bellamy agreed, "I loved Honest John's. The men at that booth were known to help out a kid or two who might have spent their money way too fast for the amount of time left at the fair," Judy also recalled her Granny Bee Bellamy putting new covers on the seats of the Tilt-A-Whirl). Becky (Ratliff) Opitz recalls her dad Herman Ratliff working all three nights of the fair in the concession stand, assisted by her uncle, Floyd Ratliff. For many years, Ratliff's Grocery and Market ran this stand which made cotton candy, snow cones, and popcorn. Becky recalls her dad coming home every night covered in cotton candy.

Every year, some incredible women coordinate the parade who are daughters and granddaughters of former town leaders who did their part so this could happen for all of them then and for us now. Amber (Weidenmaier) Parker (granddaughter of Robert Weidenmaier), Jamie Pittman, and Becky Opitz will be seen buzzing around in a golf cart lining up everyone up for the parade, (not to mention all the pre-planning and coordination that goes ahead of it). As these ladies continue this rich legacy, they, along with other hard-working members, represent the Fort Cobb Community in Action, a community organization that hosts the annual Easter egg hunt and the Christmas event on Main Street every year.

Mike Sebastian, President of Washita Valley Bank, has served as president of the fair board for the past 42 years. Mike, his wife Rita, their three children: Miranda, Brennan, Mikayla, and their spouses; along with Rita's parents Glenn and Louise Hass, and Rita's brother Bryan Haas and his family take on the many roles and tasks of coordinating the maintenance of buildings and rides; coordinate the

booths and prizes, and (although they won't admit it) this family does most of the work. During Mike's tenure, the Fort Cobb Fair Board partnered with neighboring communities to purchase the Scat, the Teacups, and the Pirate Ship. The surviving rides from that 1967 trek from Sulphur include: the Merry-Go-Round, the pony carts, the little cars, and the little Ferris Wheel. While I haven't yet discovered the origin of the Little Jennie, it sits there waiting for toddlers with a fresh coat of paint.

Mike mentioned how much he appreciates Sonny McCauley and Bob Weidenmeier who turned the leadership of the Fort Cobb Fair over to him 1980. They still came around to help for several years thereafter. Others from the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, and the Fort Cobb Civic Club are too numerous to mention. There are some faces that come immediately to my mind who are instrumental in the preparation for the Fort Cobb Fair: Bob Dyer, Emil Palesano, Carlie Weaver, Kem Crowell, Larry Rogers, and Don Tyson. It would be remiss of me not mention appreciation to their wives and to so very many others who have worked booths and ran the rides over these many years.

The dirt floor booths, bingo stand, and concession stands have been relocated and rebuilt to comfortably accommodate fair goers who enjoy the food, booths, carnival rides and each other's company. Memories are always in the making for everyone at the Fort Cobb Fair.

As the Fort Cobb community celebrates the 80th Anniversary of Fort Cobb's first fair and parade, I recognize the remarkable history as recounted by those above who told stories of how the current fair and rides came about. The Fort Cobb Fair is like a precious jewel, treasured by many families who have called this community home for generations – for the many who moved away and who then return year after year. Numerous Fort Cobb residents and community members have deep roots and commitment to this fall homecoming year after year. I wish to apologize to anyone I unknowingly omitted. I want to hear your stories to add to an expanded version of this tale. If only I had the time and the space to write more about the Turney family band called the Peanut Pickers, or Sandi (Hamilton) Berry's dad who cut the shoe off the little girl whose foot was stuck when the train derailed; he handed her mom a twenty for the pair of shoes he ruined. Please look me up at the Fort Cobb Fair this weekend. You'll likely find me in the Oak Grove Cemetery booth. I will gladly add your story to the incredible history of this small-town fair in southwest Oklahoma, as Fort Cobb and this community continue to build for a progressive and bright future.

Written and submitted by Ronda (Weber) Weaver