

Oldham County Fair History

Forward:

In 1979 a University of Louisville Speed Scientific School Master of Engineering Degree candidate named Lawrence Martin Heil prepared an Oldham County Fairground Development plan as his Masters Thesis. The plan arose from the Oldham County Fair Association's need to provide a future development plan as a stipulation of \$50,000 in State funding for the improvement fairground facilities. Mr. Heil did an excellent job on the plan resulting in a thorough account of the history and circumstances of the Fair and a no-nonsense approach to improving it. The history that follows includes excerpts from Mr. Heil's thesis. The Fair Association is extremely grateful to Mr. Heil for providing this valuable account of the history of the Oldham County Fair. It is unlikely that the research that went in to this history could have been conducted in current times as so many of the people and memories are lost. In addition to Mr. Heil's work, articles from the Oldham Era, various other written sources and the collective memory of those who have toiled at making the Oldham County Fair a success have also been vigorously mined for historical information.

History:

The original Oldham County Fair was held on July 4, 1933 on a small farm located on US 42 at Skylight with a race track and a few horse barns owned by Mr. Ed Axton. The Fair sponsors were the Liberty School P.T.A., Skylight-Goshen Homemakers Club, Oldham County Farm Bureau, Wood Axton and William Belknap. A planning meeting was held at Liberty School on Monday Night, June 12, 1933 in which an executive committee and subcommittees were established. The fair was a huge success with 2,500 people in attendance. Proceeds went to the Liberty School P.T.A. and were used to improve the library, laboratory and music work at the school. The fair started primarily as a horse show. Quickly growing to include livestock competition, booths, and displays, it became very popular. The Fair continued to be held at Ed Axton's farm for several years becoming treasured annual event.

In 1946, Mr. Axton decided to reclaim his farm, and asked that the fair no longer be held on his property. The original Fair Board was disbanded. During this time, a group of six men in the county were determined to recognize Oldham County's veterans who had fought in World War I and World War II. These men were not satisfied with just erecting a monument or a statue. In May, 1946, Philip H. Hollenbach, Forest L. Nelson, A. D. Hampton, Jesse C. Dixon, James A. Edwards, and W. W. Head bought 19.43 acres and formed the Oldham County Park Association. The purposes for which this corporation was organized are:

"A. To memorialize those of Oldham County, Kentucky who served in and with the Armed Forces of this Country in World Wars I and II.

B. To establish and maintain community centers for citizens of Oldham County, Kentucky, and playgrounds, parks, forests, and recreation centers, for children of Oldham County, Kentucky, and to erect buildings there on. "

There was much work to be accomplished in shaping the property into a park. A community spirit began to spread. "Everyone pitched in!" Farmers helped by bringing their equipment and farm workers. Grading needed to be done with bulldozers in clearing the ground and building the lake. A local engineer donated his efforts by drawing up the plans and doing the survey work. Community effort and \$10,797 in donations went into creating a beautiful park out of scrub ground.

Jesse Dixon, a member of the Park Board, heard about the predicament that the Fair was in. He suggested that a joint meeting of the old Fair Board and the Park Board be held. In April 1947, a group of Oldham County Citizens met with the Oldham County Park Association's Board of Directors to organize a Fair Association for Oldham County. It was agreed the Oldham County Fair could be held at the Memorial Park. The cash assets from the original Fair had been donated to Liberty School, but the physical assets (such as

lighting equipment) were donated to the new Fair Board. The Oldham County Fair Association, Inc. was created as a nonprofit civic corporation. One person from each magisterial district was selected to serve on the Board of Directors along with other concerned citizens.

There was much to be accomplished before the first fair opened on the park grounds in 1946. Again, everyone pitched in. Farmers helped by bringing their equipment and hired men to build a horse ring and roads. A local farmer made his barns available for horses during the fair. A large tent was rented from Kentucky Tent and Awning Company which was utilized for booth space. The Park Board members signed a loan for \$2000.00 to finish work started in preparing the grounds for the fair. ***The first Oldham County fair on the Park grounds was a fantastic success.***

The Merchants Building was constructed the following year for booths and displays. The aluminum roof was donated by Billy Reynolds. Proceeds from the 1946 fair and money borrowed from the bank were used to buy other necessary materials. As time went on, a cattle barn, and later a horse barn were also constructed. Consistent with the Park's original purpose, 1.46 acres was leased to the American Legion Post #39, Inc. "for the construction of a legion hut and playground ... as a memorial to those who served in World War I and World War II from said County," in February, 1950.

Directors of the Oldham County Fair Association and the Oldham County Park Association again held a joint meeting in April, 1950. The Oldham County Fair Association was deeded half interest in the 17.97 acres. The fair continued to experience success in the years that followed. The horse show was considered to be second only to the State Fair Horse Show. Citizens recall the days when the ring was decorated with archways in the grassy center. Oldham County regularly had the highest percentage of national 4-H winners in the state. From 300 to 500 young girls were involved in competitions such as rug-making, canning, frozen foods, clothing, refinished furniture, and home improvements. The 4-H exhibitors from the Oldham County Fair had 98 state and 29 national winners in thirty years. In the Women's Division, the Homemakers had various competitions in projects that they had been working on during the past year. The Homemakers even had a special booth for instruction where they taught home skills such as canning, rug-making, refinished furniture, slip covering, or other homecrafts. The Homemakers also offered home-cooked meals at a reasonable price in the Dining Room. People recall going to the fair just to eat the meals the Homemakers prepared. The Cattle Show, Pet Show, Carnival, Baby Contest, Beauty Contest, Booths, and Exhibits all contributed to making the fair a big success, year after year.

The Fair remained the pride of Oldham County for many years. However, by 1970 the popularity of country fairs in general was waning and attendance began to drop off. The aging buildings were deteriorating and proceeds from the Fair and other events were not sufficient to properly maintain them. By the late 1970s, community interest in the Fair was at an all time low.

In 1979 the Oldham County Fair received a \$50,000 State grant for the improvement of the fairgrounds. The Fair Board, as well as many in the community, worked at improving the fairgrounds with renewed enthusiasm. The facelift was not the only improvement the Fair needed – the Fair needed to improve its image and demonstrate a commitment to the community. Since 1980 the Fair has had it's ups and downs and has continued to operate on a minimal budget. Through the dedication of many committed volunteers over the years it has managed to provide a Country Fair and various other events and entertainment to the people Oldham County.

Oldham county is changing in many ways: doubling in population since 1980, transitioning from primarily agrarian to a more industrial and suburban orientation, and focusing more on education. Surprisingly, the Fair has experienced somewhat of a resurgence as people seek out a slice of yesteryear and attend country fairs, parades, harvest festivals, farmers markets and the like in large numbers.

The Oldham County Fair continues to run on a meager budget and lots of volunteer labor. Nevertheless, the Fair remains committed to providing the community with quality, wholesome, family entertainment and a country fair atmosphere. After over 70 years of the Oldham County Fair, the most important thing it has given us is the life long memories of the good times we have had there. The job of the Oldham County Fair Association is to keep those memories coming.