**First Erie County Fair held in 1855**

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PERKINS TWP.

With the Erie County Fair about to begin, this is a good time to talk about the history of fairs in Erie County.

County fairs have a long tradition in the United States, beginning with “The Cattle Show and Agricultural Fair” in Pittsfield, Berkshire County, Massachusetts, in October 1810.

Agricultural fairs and societies have a rather long history in this area, as well, beginning with the Huron County Agricultural Society in 1833. The group was formed to promote the region’s agricultural products, in response to an act of the state legislature encouraging the establishment of county agricultural societies. The society’s first county fair was in Norwalk in October 1838, several months after Erie County was created from northern Huron County. A joint Huron and Erie Counties Agricultural Society operated briefly beginning in the 1840s, until it was disbanded after its last fair in 1854, also in Norwalk. Not long after that, the Erie County Agricultural Society was founded.

The first Erie County Fair, in 1855, was in Sandusky. But for the following five years, the host city for the Erie County Fair was Huron, which outbid Sandusky for the privilege ($1,000 to $850). In 1860, the society voted to hold the next five years of the fair in Sandusky, but the annual event was suspended during the Civil War. By 1865, the Erie County Agricultural Society decided to purchase land to make a permanent home for the fair.

Before this, however, Sandusky hosted an even bigger fair. In its early days, beginning in 1850, the Ohio State Fair was held in a different city each year. Sandusky was chosen to host the ninth annual state fair, Sept. 14-17, 1858. According to a publication announcing the event, the fair was to be held on a 36-acre plot “just beyond the corporation limits on the southeast portion of the city” — at that time, just south of Scott Street. One estimate (possibly exaggerated) reported that as many as 16,000 people visited the fair on its busiest day. The newly opened high-rise hotel, the West House, accommodated many of the out-of-town visitors.

The land for the first permanent home for the Erie County Fair was purchased in 1866, at or near the site of the state fair (the records on this are not clear) — bordered by Columbus Avenue, Scott Street and Milan Road, with the main entrance at Wayne Street. The fairgrounds included a half-mile racetrack with a grandstand and several exhibition buildings. An 1888 map of the grounds shows a main exposition building, a dining hall, a grandstand and exhibit buildings for agricultural machinery and produce, among other things. By 1879, these buildings were accessible via a tunnel under the racetrack. At the edge of the grounds, outside of the racetrack infield, were the “piggeries” — probably a wise location for them. The fair stayed at this site until 1900, when the county and the agricultural society arranged a property trade. The old fairgrounds land was converted into the Cable Park residential area.

The new fairgrounds were at the edge of town, at Camp Street and Perkins Avenue. This site had a less successful history for the county fair. Ironically, part of the reason for the move in 1900 was that larger grounds were desired due to the popularity of the fair. Unfortunately, that was the peak era for the fair, with a significant decline in public interest beginning around 1920. Attendance dropped steadily in the 1920s, so that by 1928 the fair board decided to abandon the yearly event. In 1942, the federal government took possession of the land to build a housing development for workers employed in war industries in Erie County, a neighborhood now known as MacArthur Park.

There were no more Erie County fairs until after World War II. The revival of the fair began with a “Fall Festival,” sponsored by local merchants, with local 4-H clubs, Granges and other agricultural organizations participating. The Erie County Agricultural Society was reconstituted in 1953, and the group began to hold “Junior Fairs” at various sites in Erie County, including Cedar Point, the Sandusky Speedway and the Plum Brook Ordnance Works.

Finally, in 1957, the Erie County commissioners offered the lease of lands adjacent to the Erie County Home, on Columbus Avenue in Perkins Township, for the Erie County Fairgrounds. This site has been the home for the fair ever since.

*Editor’s note: This article appeared in the Register Aug. 5, 2013.*