

Donation of the Month

Object: Rogers Fairgrounds Souvenir
Catalog #: 1975.1.26
Donor: Marjorie Bryant



Livestock preening, produce gleaming, politicians glad-handing, horses racing - the fair is in town! While harvest fairs have been around for centuries, Elkanah Watson is credited with organizing the first agricultural fair in the United States. After a life as a merchant and banker, Watson retired to Berkshire County, Massachusetts, to raise sheep. Concerned that Americans weren't keeping up with European progress in animal husbandry and farming, he organized a cattle show in 1810 which went on to become a much larger and varied fair under the auspices of the Berkshire Agricultural Society.

The Washington County Agricultural and Mechanical Association held the first fair in Northwest Arkansas in 1856 around the Fayetteville square. After a long hiatus caused by the Civil War and Reconstruction, the fair resumed in 1878. A decade later Benton County joined in the fun when a number of prominent Rogers residents, including banker W.R. Felker, merchant W.A. Miller, and political leader J.A.C. Blackburn, sponsored the Benton County Horticultural, Agricultural, and Mechanical Fair. The fairgrounds were located south of Oak Street and east of First Street. According to newspaperman Erwin Funk,

No account of that first fair [in October 1888] is available but old timers reported there were big crowds every day with people coming from all over the Southwest, attracted largely by the [horse] races. County fairs were few and far between in 1888 and every section had a horse or two on which its backers were willing to bet their shirts.

The fair continued for many years, offering visitors a chance to view local livestock and produce, visit with their neighbors, and hear edifying speeches and toe-tapping music. Competition was important too. At the 1896 fair, during the height of a nationwide craze for bicycling, a \$5 prize was given to the “most graceful lady bicycle rider.” The winner was Anna Blake, Betty (Mrs. Will) Rogers’ sister.

But as popular as they were, Rogers’ early fairs weren’t a complete success. During the eight years they were held many of them incurred financial losses. After the 1896 fair the buildings and grounds were sold to pay off debts. W.H. Fowler was the highest bidder, purchasing the 20 acres that made up the fairgrounds for \$2,570; J.A.C. Blackburn bought the main exposition hall for \$125. Once the buildings were removed, the land was used for football and baseball games.

By 1903 area leaders were ready to try again. A group of Rogers businessmen bought back most of the old fairgrounds and put up a new exhibit hall, an amphitheater, a barn for the racehorses, and pens for sheep and hogs.

Billed as the Arkansas State Fair, Governor Jeff Davis was on hand for its opening on September 29th. Covering the fair for the Rogers Democrat, perennially witty editor Erwin Funk noted:

Instead of opening yesterday morning in a blaze of glory, the Arkansas State Fair was ushered in by about as nasty wet weather as it is possible to serve up to a disgusted crowd. . . . The sideshows, fakirs, refreshment stands, etc., did a poor business and presented a mighty forlorn appearance. Faces a foot longer than nature intended them to be were very common.

Fortunately for the fair’s stakeholders, sunny skies returned and so did the crowds. Farm wagons poured into town along with excursion trains, including nine cars of visitors from Grove, Oklahoma. Day passes were 50 cents; the four-day “season” pass was a bargain at \$1, because it was transferable to whomever held the ticket. But not everybody could pay the fee. “Every once in a while a small boy would drop over the fence at some obscure corner, but the guards were pretty vigilant and the number was small.” Overall there wasn’t too much trouble at the fair. By the second night “some four arrests [were] made . . . one common drunk, one skin game operator, and two stand owners who had failed to secure licenses.”

The fair had something for everyone. At the farm display visitors could see corn, strawberries, alfalfa, soy beans, whippoorwill peas, and Jewell Dickson’s mammoth pumpkin, which weighed in at 64¾ pounds. The fruit display consisted chiefly of apples such as Ben Davis, Arkansas Black, and Mammoth Pippin. Over in the stock area horses, cattle, swine, angora goats, and poultry patiently waited. The pantry stores display was a surprisingly slim given the number of farm wives and homemakers who canned, but there were blue-ribbon jellies, preserves, pickles, and catsups, and even a few entries of cakes and breads in the youth category. But the crowd favorite was the bunting-draped Art Hall with its abundance of quilts, paintings, artwork, burnt-wood displays, and fancy work such as Battenburg lace, silk-embroidered centerpieces, and doilies.

Fairgoers enjoyed balloon ascension, merchant J.W. Bryant’s exhibition of Studebaker wagons and buggies, and the Bentonville Band, which looked “quite nobby in their new [dark blue] uniforms. . . . The suits were only received last week.” Special premiums or prizes were given including \$2.50 each to the oldest man and woman at the fairgrounds and \$1 for the best-looking pair of twins. Chances were sold on a \$500 piano which was won by Henry E. McGaugh of Centerton; he was so pleased with his win that he gave \$5 to the little girl who drew his name.

Peanuts, popcorn, and souvenirs were plentiful, including this little china bud vase. It’s unclear whether or not the image of the horse-racing grandstand depicts Rogers; this may be a stock illustration, used on fair souvenirs all over the country. The Museum is fortunate to have other fair souvenirs in its Permanent Collection, including a small china plate similar to the bud vase and several ruby-red glass punch cups

and a green glass pitcher, each etched with the words "Rogers Fair, 1903." The bud vase was donated by Marjorie Bryant whose father was a prominent merchant in town. Although she was only a toddler at the time of the fair, it's likely that one of her elder siblings or parents bought the fairing (a present bought or given at a fair).

As was the case at earlier fairs, the highlight continued to be the horse races. The "county trot" was the most popular because the horses were driven by their owners, all locals. A horse by the name of Gail McMahon, owned and driven by J.H. Buckley of Rogers, was the winner of the half-mile trot, coming in with a time of 2:56. Rain interfered with a race or two, causing Funk to joke, "the clay makes almost as nice mud as it did dust." But he was impressed with race starter J.T. Weathers, who was "quite a curiosity among horsemen for he neither smokes, drinks, chews nor swears. We certainly trust he will be with us next year."

With the financial success of the 1903 fair, the board made plans for the following year. Once again the trotting races brought in the crowds but the number of exhibits were down, even though the Art Hall featured a pagoda "sheltering a cluster of palms;" a display of "Oriental dress from China and Japan," and a "queer basket made from the shell of an armadillo."

Signs of financial trouble began to appear by the 1905 fair. In a pre-fair article titled "Up to You Now," townspeople were entreated to attend every day of the fair and business owners were asked to give their employees time off. The notion that the fair only benefited the stockholders was also decried. Arguing that everyone benefited, the reporter noted "If it [the fair] should fail, it makes doubly difficult the matter of ever starting another here; and every one knows that it was no easy matter to get it going this time."

Although the 1905 fair offered a merry-go-round, two moving-picture shows, a fortune teller, a string of electric lights by the grandstand, and even an octopus, there were less exhibits and less interest in the races. As Erwin Funk noted, new racing rules meant that "it was no longer required to have the owner as a driver. . . . The new ruling may have brought better driving, but it took away the local interest, which was centered as much in the driver as in the animal."

Rain plagued the 1906 fair, pretty much shutting it down by Friday. Funk wrote, "It was an unfortunate ending to a rather disagreeable week and is the first time since the opening of the fair that it has encountered a solid week of bad weather. It is unnecessary to say that no dividends will be declared by the [fair] management . . ." The fair lost \$700 that year; combined with an existing \$4,300 in debt the board members had no choice but to sell the fairgrounds once again.

Fortunately for Benton Countians, a new fair was underway in the county seat. At the turn of the 20th century Benton County was a national leader in fruit production. In 1902, Bentonville mayor Charlie Haney met with the Benton County Horticultural Society to present the idea of a Free Fruit Fair. While folks worried that a fair devoted to fruit alone could not succeed (especially when the failed Rogers fairs included all agricultural products), the group decided to give it a try. Held around the Bentonville square, the first Benton County Fruit Fair was a success. From those humble beginnings emerged the Benton County Fair, which celebrated its centennial in September 2004.

A few remnants of the old Rogers fairgrounds still exist. The land for the Fourth Ward school (sometimes called the Fairgrounds School, later called Maple Grove School) was carved out of the northwest corner of the original fairgrounds between the time of the first and second runs of the fair. The building still stands at 810 West Arkansas. Nearby are three conical stacks of stone and cement that served as markers for the old horse-racing track. Two are located at the northeast and southeast corners of First and Mulberry, while the third sits on the northwest corner of Willow and Arkansas.

CREDITS

Erwin Funk, "Arkansas State Fair," *Rogers Democrat* (9-30-1903, 9-28-1904, & 9-27-1905), "Up to You Now," *Rogers Democrat* (9-20-1905), and "First Benton County Fair Held in Rogers in the Fall of 1888," *Rogers Daily News* (7-1-1950); "Benton County Fairs Began in 1888," *Rogers Sunday News* (2-25-1973); personal conversation with Henry Matlock (1990s); Gaye Bland, "Fair Time! Discovering the Deep Roots

of Northwest Arkansas' County Fairs," *CitiScapes Metro Monthly* (8-2004); BookRags.com, "Biography of Elkanah Watson," <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/elkanah-watson/>