For so many of us, it seems that our county fair has been around forever. The living generations of today cannot remember a time when they didn’t have a fair in their county. I’m certain the corn dog was invented well before the turn of the century!

Well, the corn dog think might not be accurate, however, the history of county agricultural fairs does stretch back a ways. In 2011, our wonderful industry will have a benchmark birthday—the big 200! It was in September 1811 when the newly formed Berkshire Agricultural Society held a Cattle Show in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, with all the elements of a modern day fair from showing livestock to the sale of refreshments, “Yankee notions” and even amusement rides.

Humans are a herd animal and have been gathering for various reasons since the dawn of time (Mastodon Festival anyone?) for Trade Fairs, Harvest Festivals, Religious events, etc. While the events can be fun, the American County Fair has unique characteristics that we all know when we see them, and that you just don’t find anywhere else. The mix of farmers and city folk, kids and seniors, new tractors and the demo derby, all blends into the American Fair landscape to create our unique identity. At the very center, the heart, the soul, is our unique concept of competitive exhibits. From the livestock barn to fine arts, millions of Americans have competed for that often elusive Blue Ribbon for almost 200 years. American Fairs are amazing as they seek to “celebrate the accomplishments of ordinary citizens,” according to the late Lou Merrill when he worked for the Western Fairs Association in the 1960s.

So, if American Fairs are unique in the event family, when did they start and who invented them? It was a gentlemen by the name of Elkanah Watson who brought about the idea of such a gathering finding a need for “a different organization, to seize upon the human heart, to animate, and excite a lively spirit of competition, giving a direction to measures of general utility . . . To do this,—some éclat was necessary—music, dancing and singing, intermixt with religious exercises, and measures of solidity, so as to meet the feelings of every class of the community, and keeping a fixt eye on the main object, all tend to the same great end, promoting agriculture and domestic manufacturers.”

True still today, county fairs promote agriculture along with showcasing their communities from the basics of home economics and horticulture to the newest technologies and latest gadgets that boggle the mind. In 2011, our fairs have the unique opportunity to celebrate at our celebrations by not just featuring the wonders of our communities, but also promoting the wonders of our industry. This is our time to showcase our fairs to our communities by demonstrating the impact fairs have had on the evolution of this fine nation. We are the representation of something constant, something
that almost every citizen has a memory of now or will make a new one this summer. Fairs are as American as you can get, no matter what your definition of that may be.

The Western Fairs Association and International Association of Fairs & Expositions are teaming up and taking advantage of this great opportunity to promote the fair industry to the country. We will be working on marketing ideas that can be used by all fairs in 2011 from advertising campaigns to a common fair theme and competitive exhibit ideas to promote our bicentennial at our fairs.

Fairs are all about fun and families and in these tough times, more fun for families is needed. The grand celebration is also an opportunity for us to give back to the generations of families who have supported our fairs for all these years. We wouldn’t have fairs without fair patrons and exhibitors so let’s see what we can do to say thank you to them for sticking with us for 200 years and going forward another 200!

Please watch for information rolling out at the 2009 IAFE (November) and 2010 WFA (January) conventions as this promotional partnership gains momentum. This is our time to shine!

1 Purebred & Homegrown, America’s County Fairs, 2008. Drake Hokanson and Carol Kratz
2 ibid

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT FROM PUREBRED AND HOMEGROWN, AMERICA’S COUNTY FAIRS THAT DESCRIBES ELKANAH WATSON’S FIRST FAIR

BY DRAKE HOKANSON & CAROL KRATZ

Then, on the last Tuesday and Wednesday of September 1811, the new society sponsored what most scholars consider the first modern agriculture fair in the United States. And while it differs in a few respects from modern county agriculture fairs, that first event, carefully shaped by Watson’s ideas, set a pattern for fairs that persists today. Modern fair goers, if transported to Pittsfield in 1811, would recognize many elements of this new kind of fair.

The event, which Watson called a Cattle Show (the term fair would be applied in years to come), opened on September 24, and by all accounts the sun rose on a beautiful New England autumn day. Fairgoers and exhibitors funneled toward the village square on foot, on horses, and in wheeled conveyances, driving cattle and sheep and hauling the occasional “mechanical invention.” Watson estimated the crowd at three or four thousand, a substantial gathering for this village in the hills. The Berkshire society had built an enclosure for livestock on the square. A number of “booths for the sale of refreshments and Yankee notions had sprung up like mushrooms,” according to a local history. The society had approved the inclusion of “innocent amusements,” and on the south side of the square next to Captain Pepoon’s tavern, an operator had set up a primitive amusement ride called an aerial phaeton, or sandango.

At eleven that morning, fairgoers gathered in the village church to hear Watson’s opening address. The crowd was likely surprised to see Watson falter at the podium. He wrote later, “It was with infinite difficulty I could command my nerves, to commence and proceed in my address.” Watson claims that his nervousness was the result of this being his first-ever public speech, which is surprising for so public a man as Watson. A more likely cause was the deepening political rift that divided the nation and probably separated Watson from many in his audience. While all who gathered here would have agreed about the need for agricultural improvement, the arguments about a second war with England raged loud in these days. Watson strongly supported going to war to end England’s domination of trade, while most of those in the gallery opposed it. A great tension must have filled the room, but if there was hostility in the crowd, Watson ignores it in his writings.

With effort he gained control of his voice and began by telling those assembled that he was unsure he was the right man for the job: “Having spent the greater part of my life in cities—with the exception of the last four years—it would have been more proper to place a more experienced farmer at the head of an institution which promises such important benefits to the community at large.” But he’d do his best, he told them, “I will endeavor to make good by my zeal and exertions, what I am deficient in experience, in the honorable profession of a farmer.”

He spoke of the poor state of agriculture in Berkshire County, comparing it to the advanced practices of England and the rest of Europe. He talked of soil exhaustion; of better breeds of cattle and swine; of new strains of wheat, potatoes, and rye; and of his intention to help farmers of the county plant madder, used to make dye. And, of course, he promoted Merino sheep for their superior fine wool and predicted great growth in local woolen manufacturing such that “the future wealth and respectability of the County of Berkshire will be built on that substantial foundation.”

Finally, knowing he could not avoid it, he turned to the deepening divisions about the war, referring to it as the “party” problem: “Al-
though the spirit of party has found its way in every other public
object in this county, I can solemnly declare, no shade of its deadly
poison has as yet, to my knowledge, entered into this institution…
Let us…one and all, for the honor and happiness of ourselves and
our country, cultivate a more liberal spirit of political charity towards
each other, and leave every man responsible only to his God and the
laws of the land…Let us then, with one voice and one heart, join
hand in hand, on this auspicious day, like a band of affectionate
American brothers, intent only on the welfare and happiness of our
common country.”

The Sun of Pittsfield called it “a judicious and well-timed Address”
and reported that it met with “unanimous approbation.” The war
would come, but for the moment the divide between patriots and
loyalists was bridged by the common need for better farms, crops, and
animals.

After the speech the Berkshire Agricultural Society awarded twelve
premiums worth a total of seventy dollars for the best oxen, cattle,
swine, and sheep, and by noon the crowd filed out into the public
square to form a procession—likely the first county fair parade in
history.

Like any good parade, it was led by a brass band, in this case the
Pittsfield Band. Next came sixty yoked oxen connected by chains
and pulling a ceremonial plow guided by the two oldest farm-
ers in Pittsfield. What splendid symbols! Sixty oxen, the great
beasts that helped clear the forests of New England and pulled the
colonial plows, passing before the crowd made clear the great power
of agriculture in Pittsfield. And the old men, who had first settled
in the area fifty-nine years earlier and had fought in the French and
Indian War, instantly tied this fair parade to already deep American
agriculture traditions.

Next came the farmers of the county, followed by a wagon-mounted
spinning jenny with forty spindles, in full operation and tended by
workmen as it rumbled by. Then a proud display of the products of
the county: great rolls of cloth, muskets, leather, anchors, all with the
flags of the United States and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
flying above them. There were marshals on gray horses, pomp, color,
and patriotic appeal. Last came the officers and members of the
Berkshire Agricultural Society, their hats docked out with heads of
ripened wheat as a proud symbol of the new society and its premier
event.

It must have been a grand event in the Massachusetts village under
the clouds of threatening war. Some said it was the biggest crowd
ever assembled in Pittsfield. It was an appeal to citizens, whether
for or against war with England, and it may well have been the
first time anybody stood by the road to applaud the common farmer
as he passed. Watson certainly understood what was at stake and
what he must do to create cooperation in divided times. This parade,
the forerunner of every fair parade since, had the effect of any suc-
cessful ritual in that it bound the participants in a shared experience
that imparted importance and dignity to the cause, the larger event.
Wrote Watson later, “It was splendid, novel, and imposing, beyond
any thing of the kind, ever exhibited in America.” With such suc-
cess, the society decided it should be an annual event.

Purebred & Homegrown:
America’s Counties fair has
a wealth of information
about fairs.

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