

History of the Jay County Fair

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Let me take you back a few years. The original 40 acres where the Jay County Fair is now held: SW quarter, SE quarter, Section 16, Twp 23, Range 14E. The title of this land by the USA to Jay County for school lands in 1836.

On June 1, 1853 a society was legally formed to organize the Jay County Fair. A directive was submitted to the president of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture. The following officers were elected: president George W. Bateham; vice president Sumner Griffin; secretary H.P. Hanna; treasurer John G. Chandler. The directors were Arnold Reed, Nelson Sawyer, Abraham Medsker, Hiram Gregg, David E. Rowle, Daniel Votaw, James S. Hudson, John J. Adair, Dennis Hough, Tobias Jetter, Wilbur Morehouse and David Adams.

According to the records of Dr. M.T. Jay the first fair in Jay County was on Oct. 4-5, 1853. It was on the grounds between Main and Water Streets and Pleasant and Middle Streets. The grounds had a small race track for running races with participants being both young men and women. The balance of the grounds was covered with farm machinery, agriculture products and livestock. The financial matters of the first JCF reported receipts of \$95.27 which was the same amount as expenditures. According to the writings of Dr. Jay, reported by the secretary H.P. Hanna, it was said, "The abstract on the financial report shows an even deal".

The Jay County Agriculture, Horticulture and Industrial was formed in 1871 by joining stocks and C.H. Clark became the president. On Oct. 2-3-4, 1872 the first fair was held on the grounds where the fairgrounds is now located. Isaac Underwood was the JCF president and the board was asked to build an oak board fence around the grounds.

The second fair on the grounds was in 1873 when the first judges' stand was built. Isaac Underwood was still president. The third fair was held Sept. 29-30-Oct. 1-2, 1874 and their contribution was two new privies and six new hog pens. Jonas Votaw was the president. The fourth JCF was Sept. 28-29-30-Oct. 1, 1875 and Jonas Votaw was still president. The fifth fair was held Oct. 3-4-5-6, 1876 and C.S. Arthur was president. That year they had the first balloon ascension. President for the sixth fair in 1877 was Elijah Lyons. John Schmuck was president in 1878 and the board drilled a new well and added a pump for this well. Also the racing association was allowed to use the new track they had built. John Schmuck was president in 1879. Jacob Gaunt was president in 1880. John Schmuck was president in 1881. Jonas Votaw was president in 1882-1883-1884-1885. In 1883 a contract was awarded to Harkins Ashly to build the first building of any consequence, Floral Hall. The amount to construct the building was \$575.

In 1886-1887-1888-1889-1890-1891 the president was Elijah E. Lyons. During this time they built 20 new horse stalls and pens for sheep and hogs and also 30 more stalls in 1886. The year 1889 was the first state board meeting and expenses of \$10 were allowed for members to attend this board meeting.

In 1891 the JCF was held on Sept. 29-30-Oct. 1-2 and it was reported that a new and magnificent building was just completed and named Floral Hall. It contained a circular stairway in the center of the first floor with exhibits, flower stands and tubs containing pumps spraying water upwards. The second floor could also be reached by a side stairway and was filled with beautiful flowers and displays by merchants from around the county. It was a beautiful building on the outside and a sight to behold on the inside. The Republican and Commercial Review newspapers wrote on Oct. 7, 1891 that this Jay County Fair was the largest in Eastern Indiana with 38,000 people in attendance. Thursday, alone, saw over 20,000 attending. The mode of travel at that time was by train, interurban, horse & buggy, spring wagons and by foot.

In 1892 the JCF president was G. Frank Gernmill and the board built a ticket office south of the main gate.

Records could not be found for the next few years and we find the JCF under new management in 1929, its 58th year. The president was Gordon Meeker's father, Fred E. Meeker; vice president Mike Ankrom; secretary Fred Freemyer and treasurer Zeb E. Hudson.

The 67th year for the JCF was in 1933 when they had a coon chase. The fair was held over an extra day because of heavy rains.

The president in 1940 was J.B. Cummins.

The JCF was held Oct. 2-3-4-5-6-7, 1953 at which time George Mays was president.

Frank Green was president in 1955.

O.A. Cy Zeigler, an auctioneer everyone knew around the county, was president in 1956.

President in 1957 was Beryl Miller.

Earl Losch was president in 1958.

Ray Burk was president in 1959.

Robert (Bob) Wehrly was president in 1960 and 1961.

In 1962-1963-1964-1965-1966-1967 Fred Miller was president.

Hiram Penrod was president in 1968 and 1969.

Clyde Bailey was president in 1970-1971-1972-1973-1974. Bob Lyons was the Keeper of the Gate and this record mentions Bob in connection with the Jayland Trotting Association. Everett May, Jr. was vice president in 1974.

The JCF was held July 25-Aug. 2, 1975 with Everett May, Jr., president and The Degler Shows furnishing the midway.

The 104th fair was held July 22-Aug. 2, 1976 with Everett May, Jr., president and the headliner being Jeannie C. Riley. Everett May, Jr. was president for five years, 1975-1976-1977-1978-1979. In 1977 the Optimist constructed a building and the special that year was Billy "Crash" Craddock. These headliners performed great shows. In 1978 Cy Ziegler was honored for 20 years on the fair board. In 1979 Cumberland Valley Shows became the midway entertainment.

In 1980, the 108th fair, Jim Peterson was the president.

Rob Weaver from the local radio station, WPGW, presided over the JCF in 1981. The headliner that year was Mel Tillis. People were looking forward to these great shows and the crowds were getting larger and larger. The fair board was working hard and that's what keeps things going.

In 1982 the president of the 110th fair was Clyde Beeler. It was held from July 12-17 and the headliner shows were Marty Robbins and Brenda Lee. That year there was discussion concerning the deteriorating condition of Floral Hall with a difference of opinion between the fair board and the Historical Society on whether or not it could be saved. Floral Hall was also called the Round House and a plan to "Save the Round House" was created. It was the county's goal to restore this building and my privilege to spearhead that drive.

Jay County contractors got involved in the renovation with Louck & Sons doing the framework and straightening of the building; raising and straightening it as best could be done. Tom Zimmerman did the restoration work on the inside of the building and Lowell Zimmerman, Tom's dad, did the electric work on the inside. By Oct. 1983 the work was complete and Floral Hall was restored to its original beauty and listed on the national register of Historic places.

Clyde Beeler was still president of the JCF in 1983 and the headliner that year was Jerry Reed.

In 1984 the headliner shows were Janie Fricke and the Atlanta Show.

The 113th JCF year was in 1985 and was the fourth year for Clyde Beeler as its president. They honored Doug and Judy Milligan that year and the headliner show was Atlanta.

Doug Milligan became president in 1986. That same year the preservation award was given to Headwater Heritage for the Round House, Floral Hall. The headliner for two nights was Steve Wariner, singer and magician, and the Henry Lee Summer Show.

Doug Milligan continued as president in 1987, the 115th year. Tina Schweiterman became the Jay County queen and that year's headliner shows were the Bonnie Nelson Show and the Statler Brothers who put on terrific shows.

The headliner for the 1988 JCF was Loretta Lynn. It was another great show.

The 117th fair was from July 31-Aug. 5, 1989. Everett May, Jr., was president. The headliner on Wednesday was "Little" Jimmy Dickens and on Thursday Ray Stevens who performed his grammy award song "Everything Is Beautiful."

The officers for the 118th year, 1990, were Everett May Jr., president; Bob Lyons, vice president; Judy Milligan, secretary; and Tom Zimmerman, treasurer. The fair was held from Saturday July 28th through Saturday August 4th. Highlights were the Barnes Rodeo, Phil Dirt and the Dozers and the Oak Ridge Boys. It was all great entertainment.

In July 29-Aug. 3, 1991 the officers were president Everett May, Jr.; vice president Bob Lyons; secretary Allen Hilfiker; and treasurer Tom Zimmerman. There was a high school band contest each year which was always a big thing. The Barnes Rodeo was back as well as Phil Dirt and the Dozers. The Demo Derby was held in front of the grandstands and the special this year was The Statlers who were a big hit.

The 1992 fair was held Aug. 9-14 and this is a good time to recognize directors as well as officers. The directors and their wives were as follows: Francis (Salty) Stults and Marge; Clyde Beeler and Louise; Don McNeese and Nadine; Rob Weaver and Mindy; Gary Trobridge and Sue; Duane Weesner and Frances; Ralph Grapner and Rosie; Tom Harriett and Mary Helen; Richard May and Dixie; Bill Bussear and Beverly; and Larry Coby and Glenda. The officers that year were the same as the year before: president Everett May Jr., and his wife Donna; vice president Bob Lyons and his wife Joyce; secretary Allen Hilfiker and his wife Sue; and treasurer Tom Zimmerman and his wife Doris. It's worth noting that these wives worked hard to make this fair good as well as their husbands. This year the main attraction was Barbara Mandrell and her group. It was another great entertaining evening.

The 1993 fair was held Aug. 9-14 and the prior year's officers were carried over for another term. The political parties continued a very popular tradition by holding Republican Day on Wednesday and Democrat Day on Thursday. The grandstand feature this year was Ricky Van Shelton.

The fair was in its 122nd year in 1994 and Everett May, Jr., was president; Bob Lyons vice president; Allen Hilfiker secretary; and Tom Zimmerman treasurer. Two more great attractions, John Michael Montgomery, and Lorrie Morgan were held on Thursday to a capacity crowd.

The 1995 fair was held from Aug. 7-12 and had a new look. Some reliable workers were keeping this JCF going in Portland, Indiana and it was becoming known as one of the finest county fairs in the country. President this year was Tom Zimmerman; vice president Bill Bussear; secretary Ron Krieg; and treasurer Gary Trobridge. The two main attractions on Thursday evening were Kathy Mattea at 6:00 pm and Joe Diffie at 8:30 pm.

The 124th fair in 1996 was another great fair. It was held from Aug. 5-10 with the main attractions being Doug Stone and Sawyer Brown. There were the usual day-by-day activities with harness racing one day, Demolition Derby, 4-H displays, political days and displays of all kinds. Officers were president Tom Zimmerman; vice president Bill Bussear; secretary Ron Krieg; and treasurer Gary Trobridge.

The Jay County Fair has stayed alive through the years and I believe volunteer help has been the answer. We have a great county fair thanks to all the participant help and fine leadership. It is a place, time and atmosphere for us, the old timers, to come together with the younger to discuss the past acquaintances and ways of life, the present days and thoughts to come.