

Fair History

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How Fairs Began - A World View

Fairs are descended from an ancient tradition originating in the gathering of tribes for the exchange of goods. The gathering places were considered to be holy - the gods would punish anyone caught fighting or cheating there. Phoenician caravans brought goods to Mecca as early as 1000 B.C. Egypt, Ireland and Greece were also home to some of the earliest fairs, which featured both religious ceremonies and trading opportunities. Fairs continued into the Middle Ages and in China, France, Russia and England, great trade fairs facilitated the exchange of European and Asian goods and information.

The first fair in the U.S. was sponsored by an agricultural society in Massachusetts and took place in 1816. Fairs soon began showing up in other areas of the country, and many of them centered around agriculture. The fairs developed for the purpose of exchanging goods, exchanging information, and making social contacts.



The State Fair Main Gate, near the turn of the century.

McMinnville ranchers show their award-winning sheep, circa 1910.



Wild rides at the State Fair, circa 1950.

For many more images, stories and history of the Oregon State Fair, the book "**The Oregon State Fair**" by Steven Robert Heine was just released. You can purchase a copy of this book [here](#).



The Oregon View - Yamhill County Organizes First

Agriculture was of great importance to Oregon Territory settlers and, as the region developed in the mid-1800s, citizens founded local agricultural societies to discuss farming practices and resources. During the 1850s, these societies began organizing county fairs, like those in other parts of the country they had seen or heard about. Yamhill County hosted the first Oregon county fair in 1854.

A State Fair is Born

The Oregon Farmer newspaper began calling for a State Fair. A group of farmers united to start the process of developing a State Fair. They called themselves the Oregon Fruitgrowers Association. They had a gathering in 1858 that is considered the first unofficial Oregon State Fair. That group is the forerunner of the current Oregon State Fair & Exposition Center, so the agency is considered to be 143 years old this year, having started in 1858.

In 1860, the fruitgrowers united with the county agricultural societies to become the Oregon State Agricultural Society. One of the first orders of business was to fix a date for an annual, official State Fair - it would begin on the second Tuesday in October and last four days. The State Agricultural Society then went to the State Legislature in the hopes that money would be made available for the awarding of premiums (prize money given to contest winners). Despite the fact that 28 of the 50 members of the State Legislature were farmers, the request was denied.

Undaunted, the State Agricultural Society pressed on and hosted the first official State Fair in 1861. The event took place on four acres of property along the Clackamas River in the Gladstone/Oregon City area.

The first State Fair was considered a smashing success. Horse racing and equestrian events were particularly popular.

Salem Becomes Home

A larger area was needed, and the State Agricultural Society began taking proposals from the smaller county agricultural societies who wanted to host the State Fair. The Marion County Agricultural Society, which hosted the Marion County Fair, had the most impressive proposal and the State Fair relocated to the 50-acre lot in Salem that was home to the Marion County Fair.

The second State Fair took place in Salem, on the same location as the current State Fair. By the time the second State Fair rolled around, other activities and attractions had been added to the displays of livestock, vegetables and fruit. Quilters, canners and bakers had organized friendly competitions.

It quickly grew in popularity and more land was acquired to accommodate the increasing number of visitors, participants and animals. By 1870, the Fairgrounds were close to their current 185 acres.

State Fair Becomes Historical "Time Capsule"

Over the course of the late nineteenth and entire twentieth century, the State Fair underwent some dramatic changes and was the site for some intriguing events:

1858 – Oregon Fruitgrowers Association gathering.

1860 – February 22 - Fruitgrowers and agricultural groups unite to become the Oregon State Agricultural Society and hold their first meeting. Despite plans for an 1860 State Fair, the Legislature declined to provide money for the premiums.

1861 – October 1 - 3 - The first Oregon State Fair is held on four acres of property along the Clackamas River in the Gladstone/Oregon City area. Prize winners received diplomas and included R.C. Greer from Waldo for fat lambs, J. Watt of Salem for the best mules, and Dr. L.S. Smith received a special notice for artificial teeth displayed on a gold plate. A silk quilt was made as a gift for President Lincoln and on display.

1862 – September 30 – Second State Fair takes place in Salem, the Marion County Agricultural Society having made a successful bid for its relocation.

1863 – Marion County presents title of land to Fairgrounds under the condition that the Fair is held on the site for the following 15 years.

1864 – July 7 – David Presley deeds 80 acres of land to Marion County Manager for the Oregon

Agricultural Society.

1865 – April 24 – Savage Estate gives 5.76 acres in trust to the Agricultural Society for \$200, turned over "without interpretation of trust."

“ December 19 – “An Act to Protect Fairgrounds” is passed. ”

1866 – Railroads extended to just a few hundred feet south of the Fairgrounds, creating a new transportation system between Salem and Portland.

1871 – Susan B. Anthony, 41, visits Oregon for several weeks and camps at the State Fairgrounds with Abigail S. Duniway, a fellow suffrage activist. Rules Governing Speed, “An Act to Protect Fairgrounds,” is passed (OSF Archives). Fairgrounds were expanded from 80 to 175 acres.

1872 – January 10 – land deeded to the Marion County Agricultural Society by the Marion County Managers.

1875 – April 22 – Oregon Agricultural Society (“OAS”) granted right of way to pipe water from Mill Stream from the lands owned by Parrish, Dickinson and Burnap.

1875 - November 15 – the OAS was granted rights to run a 4-inch drain pipe from the State Penitentiary to the Fairgrounds for the purposes of draining water from the State Penitentiary's roof for irrigation use.

1877 - The public got a look at the phonograph, which was invented by Thomas Edison that same year, and the telephone, which had been invented by Alexander Graham Bell the previous year.

1885 – Oregon legislature gives control of the Fair to the State Board of Agriculture, with appropriations of \$5,000 for its operating budget. The Fair is scheduled to open on September 21, because there was to be a full moon and the Fair had yet to have electricity.

1891 – December 5 – Deed recorded Oregon State Agricultural Society to State Board of Agriculture. Natural Resources Building constructed.

1893 - The State Legislature appropriated \$11,000 for Fairgrounds improvements. The money was used to construct a water system, improve the floral gardens, and build a new racetrack and grandstand.

1895 – This year, the State Fair was extended to ten days. Bicycle races were added as a special feature, sanctioned by the League of American Wheelman. William Jennings Bryant visits the Fair and makes a speech about local wool and industry, advocating that Oregonians stop sending their wool to Boston to become rugs, but to instead invest in local industry.

1897 – Fairgrounds become state property.

1900 – The Oregon Farmer newspaper commended the State Fair for accomplishing the ongoing goal of providing the state with the "opportunity of developing her agricultural resources and, when developed, of letting the world know what they are." Electricity comes to the Fair, as well as about 1,000 campers.

1901 – The price of admission to the State Fair was 25 cents for men and 10 cents for women.

1904 – The Fair features its first automobile display.

1905 – No State Fair took place, because Oregon was marking the 100th anniversary of the Lewis & Clark Expedition with a big celebration in Portland.

1909 – Admission to the Fair was made equal for men and women: 26 cents. This year, the Fair made \$20,000.

1910 – Visitors got a rare look at a "flying machine." It had been just six years since Orville and Wilbur Wright made their historic first flights in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

1911 – Horse Stadium was built.

1913 – Management of the Fair passed to a Board of State Fair Directors by legislative act. Commercial Exhibits building constructed.

1914 – Red Cross Building constructed.

1918 – Auto and tractor show added.

1919 – Horse Stadium restoration and construction.

1921 – Fairgrounds annexed into City of Salem. Salem police begin patrolling the grounds. Poultry and Machinery Exhibit Buildings constructed, which are now the oldest buildings on the grounds, listed on the Historic Registry.

1925 – Crafts and Hobbies Building constructed.

1926 – Natural Resources Building constructed.

1927 – The State Fair took place on a Sunday for the first time, although horse racing on Sundays was forbidden by the state. For many years, vaudeville acts entertained the crowds and ministers preached to fill the void on Sundays.

1929 – Grandstand was built.

1931 – Management shifted to the State Board of Agriculture, created by the legislature that year.

1932 – Family Bargain Day - \$1 for whole family and car. Boys and Girls Day is begun with free admittance for all high school age students and younger. Also, gambling is a big problem for the Fair this year – gamblers supposedly made more than \$15,000, and 30 games were shut down by Police Chief Minto and officers.

1933 – Pari-mutual Betting Act passed by Legislature, which allows on race horses was allowed for the first time to fund the fairs and special shows such as the Pendleton Round-Up. Governor Julius L. Meier proclaims "let there be no funding for the fairs. Feed the people before we entertain them." Admission is reduced from 50 cents to 25 cents due to the Depression. Opening day of the Fair was moved to Labor Day, to take advantage of the holiday.

1934 – This year marked the centennial of Jason Lee's arrival in Salem, and the Fair celebrated with a caravan re-enacting his journey westward. The wagon train left Boston in April and arrived in Salem in time for the Fair. The old attendance record was shattered that year, when more than 180,000 visitors flocked to the Fair. A 1-1/3 mile racetrack was built, and an Indian Village added, populated by members of the Snohomish Tribe of Washington.

1935 – Leo Spitzbart becomes Manager of the Fair.

1937 – Livestock Barn built. In Livestock Circle, the last individual barn collapsed under the weight of snow.

1938 – Les Cook's Cotton Club Orchestra performed. Administration Offices were built.

1939 – A "seeing eye" was added to the race track to settle any disputes on close finishes. A 5,000-animal stock barn was built, along with a new goat barn and restaurant row.

1942 – Maybe there was a State Fair, maybe there wasn't. Some say it took place on a limited scale due to World War II (including only 4-H displays, livestock exhibits and 27 county displays), while other accounts note that it didn't take place at all. Either way, 1942 is not considered an official State Fair year.

1943 and 1944 – No State Fair took place during these WW II years, because several branches of the military leased the Fairgrounds to house personnel. In the summer of 1943, at the request of the Willamette Valley Cherry Growers, the Fairgrounds became a labor camp for the Mexican workers needed to harvest the cherry crop.

1946 – Governor Earl Snell's opening day speech was broadcast over radio for the first time, inaugurating a new tradition at the Fair. A moveable stage on a track was created for the musical reviews and variety shows which were held at the Grandstand. Sammy Davis, Jr., played this stage as an unknown with his father and brother, as did Ted Mack.

1946 – Salvation Army Donut hut at the Fairgrounds to raise money for building repair.

1947 – Racing Stables were built.

1951 – Management shifted to the State Fair Commission, newly created. Commission members served

four-year terms and were appointed by the Governor.

1952 – The newly created State Fair Commission approved the sale of beer at the State Fair. The order was rescinded a few days later following protests by church groups who didn't like the idea of liquor at an event that attracted so many young people. Beer did not make a comeback until 1971.

1955 – Beef Barn was built.

1957 – Howard Maple becomes Fair Commissioner and Manager. Capital improvements included extending the track ½ mile to be 5 furlongs, new thoroughbred stables, additional parking lots, house stables area, new roads and other track/Grandstand improvements, and the Lone Oak program.

1958 – Fair runs for 10 days for the first time. FFA Exhibit Building, 4-H Cafeteria and Dormitory, FFA and 4-H Auditorium, and additional Racing Stables were built.

1960 – September 6th – Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy brought his Presidential Campaign to the State Fair.

1961 – A 90-foot Titan missile, similar to the one that had just launched a satellite into orbit, was displayed. Visitors were able to get a close-up look at space age technology, while an old-fashioned rodeo kicked up just a few hundred yards away. The theme of the 1961 Fair was the "100th Birthday of the 96th Annual Fair." A birthday party was held on the Capitol steps, complete with a 16 x 16-foot cake, portrayals of Oregon's historical figures, and square dancing.

1962 – The Oregon Educational Network, KOAP-TV in Portland and KOAC-TV in Corvallis inaugurated the first live, regular schedule of television programming from the State Fair. Show Horse Barn is constructed this year, and hearings on the State Fair are held: "Legislative Interim Committee on Agriculture."

1963 – Floral Building constructed/improved.

1964 – The dates were changed so that the last day of the State Fair would be on Labor Day. This change was made to better accommodate school children.

1965 – The 1965 Fair was considered the true centennial of the Fair, and Northwest Natural Gas created a 75-foot candle, the "Oregon Flame," to honor Oregon agriculture. The candle, fueled by natural gas, was turned on by Governor Mark Hatfield as the Fair opened. A brand new Women's Building was added that year. Atomic energy displayed at the Fair.

A time capsule was placed by Oregon Governor [Mark O. Hatfield](#), Fair Manager Howard Maple (a former Oregon State University college football quarterback and professional baseball player) and other officials in 1965 in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Oregon State Fair. **It is scheduled to be opened on August 29, 2065.** The capsule is located in front of Cascade Hall, a few feet north of the east-side entrance. The [skylift](#) and [L.B. Day Amphitheater](#) are nearby. The text of the marker reads:

CENTURY TIME CAPSULE

PLACED HERE AUGUST 29, 1965
BY OREGON GOVERNOR
MARK O. HATFIELD
TO COMMEMORATE THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY
OREGON STATE FAIR

—————
TO BE OPENED AUGUST 29, 2065
—————

OREGON STATE FAIR COMMISSION
MRS. MARION T. WEATHERFORD, CHAIRMAN
THEODORE E. SHOOP - URSEL C. NARVER
EZRA KOCH - SANFORD NEMEROVSKY
HOWARD MAPLE, MANAGER

Click a photo to enlarge



1966 – October - First indoor tennis courts in the Pacific Northwest built inside the Women's World Building.



1967 – OSF Commission asks Legislature to fund 10 year rebuilding program.

March 31 – Howard Maple resigns. Robert L. Stevens takes over.

July 31 – The Fairgrounds were hit hard by a raging fire as preparations were under way for the State Fair. The fire destroyed the 63,500 square foot Commercial Building, which was built in 1913, and the adjoining Natural Resources Building, a 47,000 square foot facility that dated back to 1891. Firemen from Salem, Keizer, Brooks and Four-Corners worked together to put out the blaze. No injuries were reported. Arson was suspected and the police apprehended a former mental patient who had been working in the Commercial Building. He was arrested and charged. He pled innocent by reason of insanity, but the plea was rejected and he was sent back to the mental hospital.

Forty percent of commercial exhibit space was lost, and Pacific Northwest Bell and Northwest Natural Gas lost permanent exhibits. There were no major injuries, but all Salem firemen were called to the scene. Insurance coverage on the two buildings amounted to only \$750,000, while replacement costs were estimated to be \$2 – \$3 million.

Governor Tom McCall met with the Commissioners and they decided to go ahead with the State Fair. The debris was cleared away and tents, borrowed from the Rose Festival, county fairs, the carnival operator (West Coast Carnival, Inc.), and church groups, were put up. Those involved with the State Fair tried to make the best of the situation, even commenting that the tents offered a nostalgic feel, as the earliest State Fairs were held under tents.

1970 – Governor Tom McCall presided over opening ceremonies with hot air balloon race to the Capitol: "Quality Environment" and "Pollution," the former of which won the race. Governor McCall dedicated the new Agricultural Exhibits and Commercial Hall buildings. The hit of the 1970 State Fair was the 103-foot replica of the rocket that took Gemini into orbit and a display of moon rocks, which had been sent to Governor McCall from President Richard Nixon. This year, the Oregon Agricultural Society purchases 72.5 acres from P.O. Riley for \$3,625 in gold coin.

1971 – Beer sold at the Fair for the first time. An additional charge was added to the ticket price for the daily shows.

1972 – A tribute to the timber industry featured two acres of exhibits, including a 32-foot high model of Mt. Hood, complete with glacial cold air, trees, fish pond and creek.

1974 – Lillie Ward becomes the first woman director of the Fair. A Legislative Emergency Board subcommittee recommended a study to determine whether the Fair should be abolished.

1975 – January – Governor Robert Straub and more than 200 people jammed a session of the Joint Ways and Means Committee to support continuation of the Fair.

“ This year, the Women's World Building changed its name to the Living Arts Building; Mrs. Richard Brady, Home Economics Superintendent, explains: "We 'liberated' our building. Now men can feel perfectly welcome here." (Oregon Journal, May 5, 1975). The centerpiece of 1975's "Salute to the Sea" was the 175,000-gallon "Oregon Ocean," a huge pool used for synchronized swimming shows and water polo matches. ”

1976 – A proposed \$1.5 million General Fund expenditure for a multipurpose building and other improvements. The Committee eventually approved the financing, with additional financial support pledged by the City of Salem, Marion County, and the Salem Chamber of Commerce. The Jackman-Long Building opened in about the same location the Commercial Building stood. The 4-H/FFA Barn also made its debut. In addition, the Carnival was enlarged.

1977 – Operations of the Fair shifted from being organized under the policies of the State Fair Commission: the Commission became an advisory board, the manager position became a directorship (empowered to affect new policies and procedures), and the name was changed to "The Oregon State Fair and Exposition Center." Because of the Fair's financial problems, Governor Straub restructured the State Fair Commission and gave control over the Fair to the Executive Department, with a Fair Director to be appointed by the Governor. Dwight Butt was appointed as Director. The State Fair Commission would be expanded to nine members, who would serve the director in an advisory capacity.

1978 – Grounds receive general facelift.

1979 – Opening day, a steer named Rufus escaped from his handlers, swam the Willamette River, and found his way to a cornfield, where he stayed for six weeks. Rufus became the Fair's mascot, and was displayed - behind reinforced fencing - from 1980 through 1987. Sadly, Rufus was euthanized in early 1988 after he injured his leg.

1980 – Fair set a new attendance record, with 647,999 visitors over the Fair's ten-day run. The Fair began booking well-known acts for its weekday shows, in an effort to boost weekday receipts. Fair admission increased to \$3.50 for adults.

1981 – This year, a legislative mandate was issued that the Fair become self-supporting and the Legislature removed General Fund support. Fair is opened by Oregon First Lady Dolores Atiyeh, as Governor Vic Atiyeh was out of the state at the Republican National Convention. A film festival was added to the State Fair events.

1982 – A new modern \$137,000 "manure removal system" was installed after problems with the City of Salem over the handling of manure at the Fairgrounds.

1983 – Rodeo discontinued due to lack of attendance and low revenues at the recommendation of Fair Board Director Dwight Butt.

1985 – Oregon Legislature passes bill authorizing Fair to sell up to \$10 million in improvement bonds for capital renovations projects. This includes a commemorative wall in accordance with the 1% for art state statutes. Three new "trolley" wagons, built by inmates of the Oregon State Penitentiary and pulled by tractors, began shuttling visitors between parking and the Fairgrounds. State Fair admission increased to \$4.00 for adults and \$1.00 for children.

1986 – A new attendance record was set of 791,000, and this was broken the next year, when 818,285 people visited the Fair. Opening day featured the largest balloon release to date (50,000 balloons). Balloons were imprinted with "Think Escape" to mark the beginning of a statewide fire safety campaign.

1987 – The old Livestock Barn is razed and the Forester Livestock Pavilion and the L.B. Day Amphitheatre opened. The Amphitheatre was named for the Salem-based State Senator who was a strong supporter of the State Fair. Improvements were also made to the historic Horse Stadium Arena (such as a new roof, electrical system, indoor paint job and cement walkway), as well as to the food concession area, the petting zoo, livestock shows and entertainment. These efforts, utilizing \$6.5 million in capital improvements, were enabled by the 1985 Legislation. State Fair admission increased to \$5.00 for adults. The first intertribal pow wow was held at the Fair.

1988 – Opening ceremonies were held at 3:30 pm rather than at the traditional 10 am start time to accommodate Governor Neil Goldschmidt's schedule.

1989 – A second arson fire, this one set by three young girls, erupted in March 1989, destroying a beef barn and causing a total of \$737,690 in damages. A \$1 million, 21,000-square-foot Beef Barn opened in time for the Fair in August and was dedicated on opening day. Improvements made to the Natural Resources Area such as a new Oregon Fish and Wildlife exhibit hall, improved landscaping and walkways. Don Hillman became Director of the Fair this year.

1990 – Friendship Square developed into an eating and entertainment area. Fountain Plaza was built for professional entertainment.

1991 – New entrance dedicated on the west side of the Fairgrounds.

1992 – The Oak Grove on the NW corner of the Fairgrounds was designated a "Heritage Tree Grove" by

the Marion Historical Society.

1993 – HB 2031 created an independent public corporation to manage the State Fair: a 15-member policymaking board replaced the advisory commission; a board-appointed CEO, etc., replaced the Governor-appointed Director.

1998 – First high definition television (HDTV) demonstration was held at the State Fair by Portland television station, KGW. Another attraction was the X-Scream Zone, which featured competitions in bike racing, in-line skating, and skateboards. During the 1990s, the State Fair added a chairlift (The Skylift) with a route that bisects the Fairgrounds (north to south) as a ride for Fairgoers.

1999 – HR 2153 – The Legislature approved use of Lottery-backed bonds for capital improvements on the Fairgrounds. This year, the first recognized miniature pig show at the State Fair occurred. Awards were presented for grooming, longest tail, biggest jowls and costumes.

2000 – The first time a hypnotist has performed a public show in Oregon since 1905 due to a change in Oregon law. Fair admission was \$6.00 for adults.

2002 – In October, the old State Fair Grandstand was demolished, with ornamental work on its stucco facade salvaged for the replacement facility. The new facility will be constructed to accommodate concerts.

2003 – Capital improvements to the Fairgrounds included the building of a brand-new \$10 million, 5,076-seat Multipurpose Pavilion, now used year-round for a variety of events.

2004 – Aerospace demonstration by Oregon Space Grant Consortium included a demonstration of high-altitude and low-altitude balloons for the educational delight of Fairgoers, young and old.

2005 – HB 3502 shifted management of the Fair to the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (effective January 2006), in order to curb the Fair's economic reliance on the state's general tax fund. The Legislation required the Parks Department to appoint a 7-member advisory board with representatives from different counties to oversee the Fair's management.

2006 – Fair sets a national example for other state fairs by teaming up with West Coast Biodiesel Co-op and Agri-Plas Inc. to recycle the leftover oil and other materials left after the annual celebration.

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