

## **Blue Earth County Fair celebrates 150**

**By Jean Lundquist, Special to The Free Press**

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— When the gates open at the Blue Earth County Fair in Garden City this week, it will signal the start of the 150th fair.

All that time, all but two of the events have been held at the same location, in Garden City.

The passage of a century and a half means many things have changed at the fair, due to technology and cultural changes. For example, at the earliest fair, a new gizmo was demonstrated: It was a 15 horse-powered threshing machine.

A horse-drawn wagon traveled between Mankato and Garden City, ferrying fair-goers to the event. When people arrived, it was for a time to socialize with old friends and eat well.

Later, a train replaced the wagon. Now, of course, neither one runs between Mankato and Garden City, though the highways have been improved for modern-day travel. Planners of the sesquicentennial fair recognize that while the fair has changed in many ways, it remains true to its roots.

### **4-H fair roots**

Though commonly called the Fair Board, members actually comprise the Board of Directors of the Blue Earth County Agricultural Society, which is how the fair was organized 150 years ago.

Fair Board members LeAnn Schwarz and Karen Malchow agree the 4-H members and their families are the backbone of the fair.

“That’s how people get to know the fair ... through 4-H,” said Malchow.

Schwarz also grew up exhibiting her accomplishments in 4-H at the fair, but in Faribault County. Because the fair was such an important part of her childhood there, it was only natural to become involved in the fair in Blue Earth County when she moved here and started raising her family.

There is still stiff competition among those who raise poultry, pigs and cattle. The competition extends to those who quilt, crochet, make jams and jellies, do woodworking and create other art. And it’s not just 4-H children; adults and others in open class are just as competitive.

Former Fair Board President Will Purvis, of Vernon Center, remembers the fair as “the social event of the summer.” Purvis said he and his friends would hurry to finish walking beans to get to the fair every day it was held.

As a child, Purvis has memories of fierce competition

between his family and one other in the county who also bred and raised registered Ayreshire cattle. Of the annual competition at the fair, he said, “Sometimes we won; sometimes they won.”

Some of his favorite memories of the fair, Purvis said, revolve around what he calls “my interactions with carnival employees.” Though he did not go into specifics about his shenanigans, he laughed as he recalled his stint as Fair Board president.

“I paid for my transgressions when I wine and dined them to get them to come to the fair,” he said.

As president, Purvis decided to honor the oldest resident of Blue Earth County one year. Gertrude Jones of Mapleton was the honoree at 105 years old. On Senior Citizen’s Day, a Classic Lincoln Continental convertible with suicide doors picked up Jones and her children and brought them to Garden City.

There, Purvis’ son, Mark, and one of Mark’s friends, bedecked in tuxedos, met them. The two young men helped Jones and her family navigate the fairgrounds on her special day. She lived to be 108, Purvis said.

Another highlight for Purvis was when a friends of animals group decided to picket the rodeo at the fair. Purvis offered to show them around the fair exhibits, especially the animal barns.

Purvis recalls that one member pointed to a water bucket in the sheep barn that had straw floating in it and asked if Purvis would drink from something like that. “I scooped up a handful, brought it to my mouth and said, ‘It doesn’t taste too bad to me!’”

Today at the fair

With one foot planted firmly on tradition at the Blue Earth County Fair, Schwarz and Malchow know they have to move ahead with the times.

After four or five years without a carnival, there will be a 12- to 15-unit carnival at the fair this year.

Compact car races will be featured and a rodeo will be a two-day event this year. Helicopter rides will be featured again this year, a big draw last year.

Fair food is always a highlight, and there will be plenty of that, in addition to the 4-H Food Stand this year.

A Sunday morning church service will be held, followed by a pancake breakfast.

“If you haven’t been around for 10 years or so, come on down and see what we’re all about,” Schwarz said.



At the Blue Earth County Fair, 4-H is a major attraction for all ages. The Free Press