

Fairs

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went on to describe the city as having been "overrun by pickpockets and robbers during the fair," and said that "the methods used in separating the sightseers from their money were both unique and original."

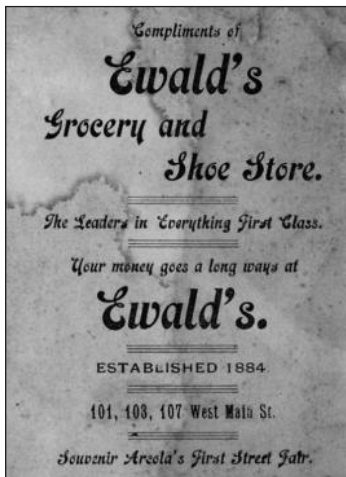
Home Comings

While the popularity of the carnival company street fairs began to wane in the early 20th century, public gatherings and entertainment remained the most popular leisure time activities in those pre-radio, television, and internet days.

A spark did remain, and recognizing the potential inherent in a street fair as a way to promote business and community while at the same time providing a source of entertainment for local and area residents, Arcola hosted a Products and Home Coming Fair in 1909. Home Coming Fairs, which were the national trend, provided all of the benefits of the original street fairs but instead of turning over control to an outside carnival company, communities formed committees that planned and essentially "policed" the events.

Amusement companies were hired for shows and rides, but they were only part of the events which now focused on local entertainments as well, such as the naming a queen for the event, in providing a big name talent to draw lots of visitors, and as the name suggests, they became an open invitation to invite everyone to come together and come home.

In preparation for the first Home Coming Fair in 1909, the Arcola Chamber of Commerce appointed Thomas Monahan Sr. as general chair of the Home Coming Committee. It was a role and a responsibility that Thomas



Souvenir card from the 1898 Broomcorn Carnival and Free Street Fair from Ewald's Grocery, note the card says "Souvenir Arcola's First Street Fair."

Monahan would continue to accept throughout the history of Arcola's Home Comings from 1909 to 1941, at which time his health began to decline.

Thomas Monahan's grandson, Pat Monahan, said he remembers his father telling him how his (Pat's) grandfather would travel around the county looking for acts to bring to Arcola in an effort to make the Home Comings "as good as they could possibly be."

The Home Coming Committee decided to hold a fair every five years but after the 1926 fair they decided to change to every three years. They events did vary slightly from that schedule, going six years between the 1914 event and 1920 event and six years from 1920 to 1926. The fairs followed the tri-annual schedule from 1929 to 1941 with the exception that there was no fair in 1932, which was most likely due to it being the height of the Great Depression and a fair was not a priority with so many people struggling financially.

The 1941 Home Coming Fair was the last of the Home Coming events, most likely due to the decline in the long-time chair's

health after this event, Thomas Monahan Sr. passed away in 1945, and due to America's involvement in World War II, which changed priorities and communities, as so many of the young men and women left home to join the military or do war work, and so many resources were rationed.

Arcola would hold one more Home Coming in 1955 as the town celebrated its 100th birthday with a Centennial Homecoming Celebration.

In 1971, Arcola revived its long and treasured street fair tradition with the first Broomcorn Festival. The annual event will hold its 52nd Broomcorn Festival in 2023. The earlier street fairs and home comings were part of a trend, most communities held similar events as they were an accepted form of entertainment at the time. But the revival of the Arcola street fair tradition with the Broomcorn Festival, creating a now 123-years-old tradition, creating a truly special tradition and making this Arcola tradition truly unique.

Chautauquas

The Chautauqua was a social movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that were meant to educate, provide culture, and entertain attendees, with speakers, teachers, musicians, showmen, preachers, and specialists of the day presenting programs in what was referred to as a "summer camp" format for families. Chautauqua assemblies expanded rapidly throughout the early 20th century. President Theodore Roosevelt referred to them as "the most American thing in America."

In 1904, two young men named Keith Vawter and Roy Ellison created the "circuit Chautauquas" or "tent Chautauquas," by forming a Chautauqua organization that would come to town, pitch its tent and provide a planned program, which allowed the organization's presenters to move on to the next town after their presentations, allowing for them to hold multiple Chautauquas simultaneously.

There was much criticism of the "tent Chautauqua" format, which many felt cheapened the concept and lowered the standards, but it helped spread the Chautauqua concept throughout rural America and by the 1920s, the circuit Chautauquas were appearing in 10,000 communities throughout the United States and reaching an audience of more than 45 million people.

Most Central Illinois communities, including Arcola, were part of the Chautauqua circuit throughout the early 20th century. By the mid-1920s, the popu-



Betty McClanahan, Arcola High School Class of 1938.



Arcola's Elizabeth Carroll was named Centennial Homecoming Queen in 1955.

larity of the Chautauqua began to wane and that seems to be the case for Arcola.

Arcola held its first Chautauqua in 1915 and its last in 1925, all of which were held at the City Park on the South Side of town, bounded by South Pine and South Locust Streets on the east and west, and East 1st Street South and East 2nd Street South on the north and south. The first Chautauqua introduced Arcola to one of its most famous visitors, the renowned lecturer Miss Helen Keller.

But by the 1920s, enthusiasm for the events seemed to have been lost. The Chautauqua circuit required each community to sell tickets for the following year during each event in order for the community to be included in the next year's circuit. By 1923 and 1924, the citizens of Arcola failed to sell a third of the tickets required for the following year which is an indication that they movement had run its course. Newspaper coverage of the events, which once covered every detail of the events, only mentioned the 1923 and 1924 Arcola Chautauquas as an afterthought. After the 1924 Chautauqua, the Aug. 21, 1924, Tuscola Journal humorously reported that interest in the Arcola Chautauquas had "sagged so much that the promoters began to suspect that [Arcolians] did not care to be uplifted."

The last Arcola Chautauqua was held in 1925. Three days after the event closed, the Mutual Morgan Company, which produced the Arcola Chautauqua, announced that they would not hold another Chautauqua in Arcola because of a perceived lack of interest.

The Chautauqua now seems like a quirky footnote in our local and national history, but it is important to note the events were a large part of our community landscape and to remember the social ramifications they brought throughout the early 20th century, affecting and shaping nearly every community. Like any trend, they are an important piece of our collective story.



A replica of the first Broomcorn Palace which was created for the 1898 Free Street Fair sits at the center of activity on Main Street, Arcola during the first Broomcorn Festival in 1971. Arcola celebrated its 51st Broomcorn Festival in 2022, Decatur Herald & Review file photo.



A Broomcorn Palace sits at the center of activity on Main Street, Arcola as the town prepares for a Broomcorn Festival in 1970s. Arcola celebrated its 51st Broomcorn Festival in 2022.



The 1955 Centennial Homecoming parade.



The soybean exhibits proved to be the center of attraction at the Arcola homecoming fete. The visitor gains an impression of the vast magnitude of the soybean industry. The arch at the entrance is made of yellow soybeans and the lettering from the black varieties.

Image of the Soybean Exhibit which was touted as the "Center of Attraction" at the 1941 Arcola Home Coming Fair, Decatur Herald, Aug. 1, 1941.

**Arcola Chautauqua**  
**Aug. 18 to 22, Inclusive**  
**FIVE GREAT DAYS**

**Chautauqua Headliners**  
 HELEN KELLER AND HER TEACHER, MRS. MACY; THE FAMOUS WELCH CHOIR, FOURTEEN PRIZE SINGERS OF THE WELSH NATION; CLIFTON MALLORY PLAYERS. IN TWO SPLENDID PLAYS; TYROLEAN ALPINE SINGERS AND YODLERS, GREAT; VICTOR ILAHI KAKSH, NATIVE OF INDIA, DRESSED IN NATIVE COSTUME; GROSSMAN'S PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA; CAPTAIN JACK CRAWFORD, THE POET SCOUT; AND MANY OTHER FINE AND ENTERTAINING FEATURES.

Ad for the 1915 Arcola Chautauqua to be held Aug. 18-22 which featured Helen Keller, lecturer, author, and disability rights and political activist, Tuscola Journal, Aug. 12, 1915.

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**Arcola RECORD-HERALD**

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**Greg Hoskins, Publisher**  
[ghoskins@heraldpubs.com](mailto:ghoskins@heraldpubs.com)

**David Porter, Regional Managing Editor**  
[presseditor1@gmail.com](mailto:presseditor1@gmail.com)  
 217.991.0935

**Stephanie Wierman, Regional Manager/Advertising Director**  
[swierman@consolidated.net](mailto:swierman@consolidated.net)

**Nancy Rairden, Composing Room Manager**  
[arcolarecordherald@gmail.com](mailto:arcolarecordherald@gmail.com)

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**ARCOLA HOMECOMING**  
 Thursday, Friday, Saturday  
 July 31, August 1 and 2

**FREE SOYBEAN EXHIBIT**  
 Largest Display of Its Kind Ever Assembled

**Lawrence Welk ORCHESTRA**  
 Park Plan Dancing each night, 10c per dance. Admission to Dance Pavilion, 10c per person. The Band famous for its Champagne Music.

**NINE BIG CIRCUS ACTS**  
 AFTERNOON SHOW 3:00  
 NIGHT SHOW 8:00  
 On Arcola High School Grounds  
 Plenty of Free Parking Space  
 BYERS CARNIVAL

Ad for the 1941 Arcola Home Coming fair which featured the Lawrence Welk Orchestra and the Soybean Exhibit, Decatur Daily Review, July 30, 1941.

**ARCOLA Home Coming**  
**August 1-2-3**

10 Great Circus and Vaudeville Acts. Al Sweet's Wings of a Century Band, and Fine Broom Corn Exhibit.

**Ozzie Nelson Dance Orchestra**  
 15 PIECES—PARK PLAN

You have heard Ozzie Broadcasting over NBC with Joe Fenner. Now see him and hear him in person and dance to his romantic rhythm. A Big Show for a Little Price.

AFTERNOON .....15c & 25c  
 EVENING .....20c & 35c

Gooding Amusement Co., here July 29th to Aug. 3rd.

Ad for the 1935 Arcola Home Coming fair which featured the Ozzie Nelson Dance Orchestra, Decatur Daily Review, July 28, 1935.

**NAME CHAIRMAN FOR ARCOLA CELEBRATION**

ARCOLA Aug 9—At the last meeting of the Arcoia Chamber of Commerce T F Monahan was appointed general chairman of the Home Coming celebration which will be held next summer. A large part of the success of the last celebration held two years ago is credited to Mr Monahan who was at that time general chairman. These homecomings have been held in Arcola for the last 25 years at intervals of five years. It was decided at the last celebration to hold them every three years

Article reporting the Arcola Chamber of Commerce appointed Thomas Monahan as chair of the "Home Coming celebration" committee for the 1929 Home Coming. Monahan was credited for the success of the 1926 celebration. It was also decided that the events would be held every three years rather than every five years going forward, Decatur-Herald, Aug. 9, 1928.