

Looking forward to seeing everyone during Ag Days



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Bruce Allen began his association with Ag Days a quarter century ago

By Tony Hooker

In 1998, Mark McGuire broke Babe Ruth's single season home run record. Monica Lewinsky became a household name, and construction began on the international space station. Closer to home, Bruce Allen started his association with the Villa Grove Ag Days Celebration.

For the last several years, he's been in charge of the entire event. I recently caught up with Allen to discuss the changes that have come to Ag Days, to his desire to pass on the mantle of leadership, and much more.

"I knew you were going to ask that," he said with a laugh when asked about his association with the event. "I've been involved for at least the last 25 years, and I've been in charge for the last four."

Over the course of the past quarter century, Allen has

seen a bevy of changes to the hometown event.

"It's changed tremendously. It's sad, because it's Villa Grove Ag Days, but there's very little agriculture involved anymore," he noted. "It's the same at the county fairs, they don't have the equipment like they used to."

The biggest change to come to Ag Days in years is that Clay County Amusements will no longer be running the carnival after a two-decade partnership.

"Connor Family Amusements, out of Beardstown, will be running the carnival this year. We got in touch with them through Kent, the owner of Clay County Amusements. He referred 3 to us, and they're the only one who expressed any interest in coming," Allen said.

The Ag Days steering committee, though sad to see Clay

County Amusements close, is excited about the new company bringing new rides and games to Main Street.

"They'll bring 8-10 rides, and they're going to try to make sure that they have rides for little kids all the way up to the bigger kids and adults," Allen emoted. "A lot of people gave us feedback that we didn't have enough rides for the older kids."

One thing that has stirred a bit of controversy is the way that Connor Family Amusements handles the wristbands for kids wishing to ride the rides.

"He (Kyle Campbell, carnival director) does the wristbands a little differently," Allen declared. He does two wristbands for Saturday instead of one for all day."

Another change is that the carnival will basically shut down from 4-6 p.m. to give the operators a break from the heat, so one band will be good until 4 and the second will be good from 6 until close.

The addition of new vendors is another thing that has Allen excited about the 2023 event.

"Michelle Bailey is in charge of the vendors, and she's really went out and beat the bushes and I think we will have 10 different food vendors alone," Allen said.

Unfortunately, the Car Show, a long-time staple of Ag Days weekend, won't be happening this year, but Allen is optimistic that it will return for 2024.

"There won't be a car show this year, but we're in negotiations with the Sundowners car club to put one on in the future," Allen relayed. "We know a lot of people miss the car show."

Another thing that was synonymous with Ag Days for years, the Beer Tent, will no longer be a part of the festivities.

"It was a lot of work, and it was a non-money maker. The tent alone was \$1,700 and then paying the insurance and the bands and everything," Allen stated. "This year, the bars are going to get their own bands and do their own thing and we'll support them in any way we can."

As with most things, the number of people who are

willing to volunteer to help with the event has dwindled, and Allen says that the problem isn't limited to Villa Grove.

"If you look around, when we take the kiddie tractor pull to Newman or Oakland or Brocton, all these little town festivals are dying from a lack of volunteers. No one wants to get involved and that hurts," Allen lamented. "We've got 4 or 5 people who kill themselves from Sunup on Friday morning until noon on Sunday. In the 25 years that I've been involved, we never had a lot of volunteers, but in the last couple of years, it's been down to the same 4-6 people."

For that and many other reasons, Allen has decided to step away from Ag Days.

"This will be my last year, and probably my daughter's last year," he declared.

For his part, Allen isn't sure that the Rodeo, which is being held on the same days as Ag Days, will help or hurt attendance at his carnival.

"We're waiting to see. I'm optimistic that it will help, but I'm also taking a wait and see attitude," he noted.

A bit of miscommunication has led to some misunderstandings in the local business community as well.

"One of the things we've run into is that we count on our local businesses to support Ag Days. Everything that we do for the kids, the straw pile, the tractor pull and things like that, Ag Days supports, and we look to local businesses to help out so we can make it free. We pay \$1200 a year just for the porta potties, for example," Allen said. "This year, a lot of the businesses have told us that they've already donated to the rodeo because they thought it was part of Ag Days."

On the other hand, Allen is hoping that the influx of cowboys and girls and their families will lead to greater attendance at his event.

"Hopefully the people they bring to town will come up to the carnival," he said. "The Rodeo is later in the evening, so hopefully it won't hurt us."

When asked about possible solutions, Allen was quick with a suggestion.

"Ideally, we need to move Ag Days to Richman Park and set it up next to the Rodeo," he declared.

As for growing the event, he said that it could be kind of a double-edged sword.

"It's kind of a catch twenty-two with adding vendors, because if you get too many, they can't make enough money to make it worth their time to come," he related.

Many of the Ag Days crowd favorites will take place as always.

"Jim Kestner will still do the 5K. FFA will have a corn eating contest again this year, there will still be a kiddie tractor pull and straw pile," he noted.

When asked if he had anything he would like to add, he was quick to thank all of those who volunteer their time to make the event a success. Two groups in particular were singled out for praise.

"Kudos to Coach Wilson and the football team and Jeremy Bennett with the scouts," he enthused.

He noted that by the time he and Donny Patton had gotten to Main street to clean up on Sunday last year, the football team and scouts had already completed the task.

"It's things like that that can really make a difference," he ended.

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