

Mo-Do County Fair noted for top acts, livestock, pageants and family fun

By Marty Yeakel

The Moultrie-Douglas County Fair (also known as the Arthur fair) has a long history in our community having just celebrated its 92nd year. In 1980, a book was written by Phyllis Stock entitled Arthur's Moultrie-Douglas County Fair — The First Fifty Years. This was followed by an update in 2005, also by Stock, at the 75th anniversary of the annual event.

The first Community Fair was held Oct. 1-4, 1924. Technically, this year (2023) should have been the 99th year, but no fair was held during a few years of the depression in the 1930s, again during the Second World War and in the year of covid, which is the reason for the discrepancy.

In its early years, the first fairs were held in the city park on the grounds of the grade school. The fair moved to its present location just south of the high school in 1953, and when a new park district was formed in the early 1950s, an agreement was made with the park district to let the fair continue on the grounds.

While the first fairs were held in the fall, gradually the dates were moved into the summer until mid-July became the norm. Recently, the MO-DO fair has been moved to earlier in July. Some of the scheduling depends on the state and on the availability of the carnival.

Those involved with the Moultrie-Douglas County Fair over the years reads like a who's who of town leaders, and in many cases, this in-

cludes several generations of some families. As with most events in Arthur, many citizens have contributed a lot of time and effort to make the Moultrie-Douglas County fair a success.

Some of the highlights and improvements made over the years include the Woman's Club stand erected in 1951, although the organization had been operating a stand on the fairgrounds for many years before that. The Merchants Building went up in 1958 and was used for local merchants to display their goods as well as vendors, county health departments and even tractor displays among many other things. A new building to house horticulture, home economics and fine arts was constructed by the Fair Board in 1978. Cattle and sheep barns were constructed over the years to replace tents. A big reason for that was safety for the animals and exhibitors.

At one time, nightly dances were held at the fair on a portable dance floor featuring big-name bands of the day, and later, rock 'n' roll groups played.

The Miss Moultrie-Douglas Fair Queen contest began in 1962 and continues today. Contestants from towns in both counties participate. In January of 1977, Miss MO-DO of 1976 Merci Izquierdo of Tuscola was named Miss Illinois County Fair.

"Free acts" were featured at the county fair for many years, which actually meant there was a gate admission charge

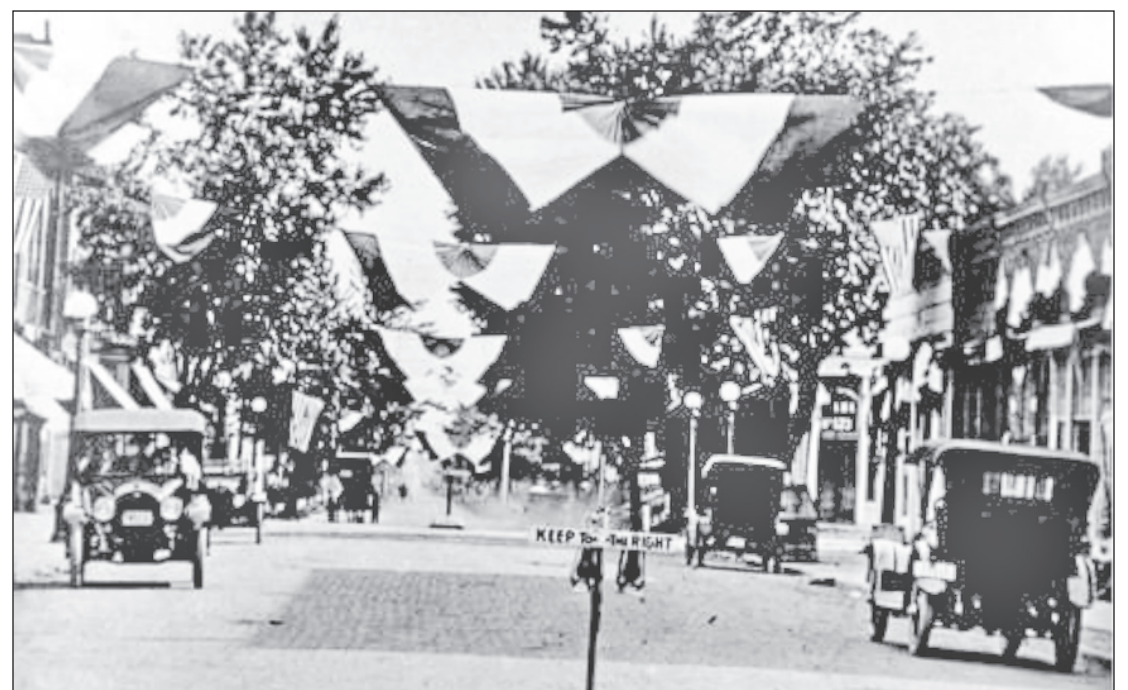


BILLBOARD PROMOTING local businesses once stood at the entrance to the fairgrounds.

but no charge to get into the grandstand. Many big names from TV and the country/western genre comprised most of the shows. In the early days, there were vaudeville and circus acts. Later, as the radio and TV era arrived, entertainers from the WLS barn dance show and then the Lawrence Welk show became popular.

Many up and coming stars and even more established stars, particularly from the country/western genre, have made for some fantastic shows. These have included the Judds, Brooks and Dunn, Marty Robbins, Brenda Lee, Tex Ritter, Mickey Gilley, Crystal Gayle, Ronnie Milsap, Oak Ridge Boys, Johnny Paycheck, Merle Haggard, Loretta Lynn, Reba McEntire, Martina McBride and many more. This is just a small list of the stars who have appeared at our local county fair and reads like a who's who of major entertainers.

Probably the most exciting year for the grandstand show was 1969 when George Jones and Tammy Wynette appeared earlier in the week along with Cissy and Bobby, dancers from the Lawrence Welk show. The week ended with the long-awaited show that had been postponed for a couple of years. The Man in Black, Johnny Cash, fulfilled his contract obligations after his failure to appear in 1967. In those two years, his star had risen and he had become a top performer in the entertainment world. His wife, June Carter Cash, and the Statler Brothers, were also on the stage that night and it was one of the most memorable evenings ever at the Moultrie-Douglas



AN ARTHUR FAIR promotion from 1916.



THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN in Villa Grove to advertise the 1926 county fair.

County Fair in terms of attendance and excitement.

No story about our county fair would be complete without mentioning the livestock, agricultural and domestic shows and the involvement of

4-H clubs and members. Early on the exhibitors for the livestock shows were adults and a junior livestock show began in 1941. These shows involving our youth remain the backbone of the county fair along

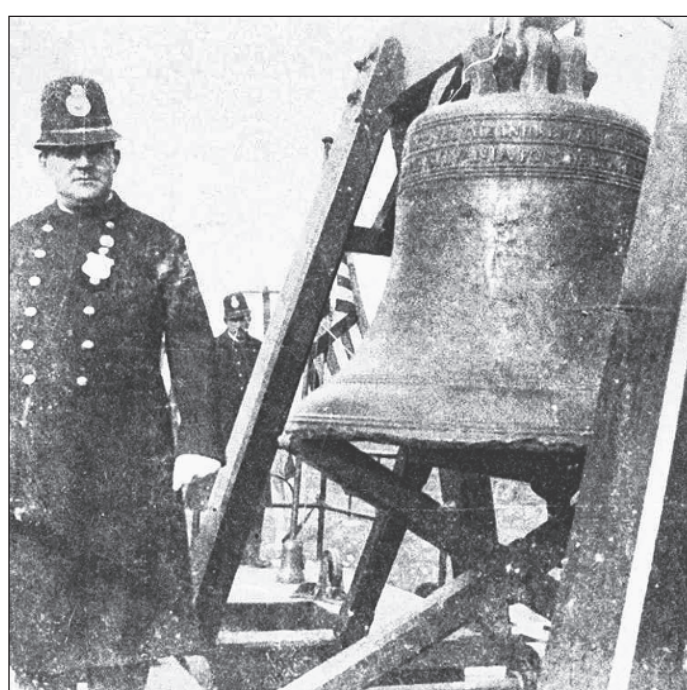
with tractor pulls, draft horse shows, pony shows and demo derbys. Many memories have been made and shared at the Moultrie-Douglas County Fair and hopefully that will continue for many years to come.



Merchants Building was constructed in 1958.



Woman's club stand, originally constructed in 1951 with many improvements made over the years.



THE LIBERTY BELL on a railroad flat car with a Pinkerton detective agent in transit to the St. Louis World's Fair. It was on the Pennsylvania Railroad, as it later went through Arthur and then Livingston on its way to St. Louis.



Special thanks to those who contributed to our special Sesquicentennial edition

Noel C. Dicks (1929-2021), pictured at left, was a pharmacist and owner of Dicks Pharmacy of Arthur from 1960 to 1995. He started his local historical venture when he made an effort to collect photos of the pharmacists and physicians who had practiced in Arthur. The project mushroomed and he became interested in the history of the town.

Through the generosity of so many people, his collection grew to include thousands of photographs, glass negatives, nitrate negatives, and other items of historical interest. Most of the photographs in this

Sesquicentennial Edition of the Arthur Graphic came from his collection and were used by permission of his wife, Iris.

Compiling information for the 2023 Sesquicentennial Celebration gets to be quite a challenge. We would like to take this opportunity to pay recognition to Arthur Village President Rod Randall, Staff Writer Marty Yeakel and the book of the late Noel C. Dicks, "Arthur, Illinois, Once Upon a Time," for their efforts in helping to make this a special edition for a special year. Thanks again for a job well done.