

The Macoupin County Fair and Agricultural Association is an organization that promotes family and agriculture in Macoupin County

“The mission of the Macoupin County Fair and Agricultural Association is to provide a county fair that showcases the agricultural products and skills of Macoupin County, as well as, providing entertainment for all ages. The association is committed to maintaining a safe; family friendly environment; at a reasonable cost; offering an educational experience highlighting the agricultural heritage of our county for our youth.”

THE PAST SPEAKS — DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN....?

BY ALICE TOSTBERG DRURY

The Present Macoupin County Fair and Agricultural Association is the direct descendant of the Agricultural, Horticultural and Mechanical Association of Macoupin County, which held its first “meet” on the Carlinville Public Square in 1852, consisting of a few horses, oxen, cows and some butter. In 1884, the program listed beef and dairy cattle, sheep, swine, junior livestock, garden products and small grains. Major Lofton was the first president. The next two succeeding fairs were held in Captain Welton’s pasture west of the city, with more articles exhibited. The next fair was held on the grounds now known as the late residence of Major B.T. Burke.

By 1860, the old association had acquired a permanent site of 22 acres at the northwest corner of Carlinville, through the efforts of Captain Welton canvassing the county asking for subscriptions of \$25.00 and they purchased land from Jarrett Dugger. John Tunnell was the first secretary for eight or nine years, and executive officers of the association for 1879 were: George Castle, President; John Carr, Vice President; B.P. McDaniel, Secretary; J.B. Liston, Treasurer. Directors: C.T. Prouty, B.H. Dorsey, Thomas A. Jones, G.M. Chedister, Robert Horton, R.O. Wood, D.C. Macknett, John Hounsley, R.P. Miller, William M. Chiles.

With occasional interruptions (the site was used in 1862 to train recruits for the Civil War) the fair was an annual event through 1929. It failed to survive the crash of ’29 and for eight years of the depression, there was no fair in Macoupin County.

In 1938, a dedicated group of rural and urban residents organized a new fair board and the fair was revived in downtown Carlinville. The old grounds had been lost, so the revived fair staked its tents on vacant lots on West Main Street on Bates Parking lot. In following years, the fair occupied a vacant field near the Carlinville High School, the Wilson property, then moved to the American Legion Home grounds after three years. There were no art halls or grandstand shows in those days; only a carnival and 4-H and open class livestock.

For a few years, the fair was held in Palmyra’s Terry Park, but the need for a permanent home was urgently felt. In 1951, the county board leased 25 acres of county-owned ground, one mile north of Carlinville, to the fair board. (It has since been increased to 40 acres, after the fair began to grow.) Alice Tostberg was assistant secretary-treasurer since the revival of the fair in 1938, with Bob Davenport as president. In 1953, the race-track was laid out and grand-

stand erected. From that time, the Macoupin County Fair has never faltered; it has found a formula for success. At that time, there were 40 fair board members, which has now been increased to 50.

The present fairgrounds was a cornfield when the 25 acres were leased, no buildings, a few tents were rented, to house livestock, and a tent was used for the office. Paul Rosentreter was the first president. In 1954, the grandstand was built, and a year later the roof was added, with a canvas roof used the first year. The Veterans of Foreign Wars building was purchased in 1954 and moved to the fairgrounds, and became known as the “Little Red School House”. This was the beginning of prizes offered for school pupils. Perhaps this department has shown the largest increase in prize money, showing 800% increase. There were only five classes offered, with \$52.00 prize money. Now we offer several hundred classes, with prize money totaling \$2,000.00. Mrs. Harry Daley of Gillespie and Mrs. Claribelle Miller, Carlinville were superintendents for many years for the school, art, and antiques department. When the fairgrounds was taken over in 1862 for training of recruits for the Civil War and renamed Camp Palmer, more than 1,750 men from Macoupin County enlisted that year, and Company K of the 7th Illinois infantry regiment, known as the “Macoupin Invincibles” want into camp at the fairgrounds. The men were housed in two large buildings and a number of temporary stalls, and it was also, briefly, the home of the 122nd regiment organized by General John Rinaker of Carlinville. By the following year in 1863, Camp Palmyra had been abandoned and the country fair resumed. Eventually, the fairgrounds grew to 20 acres, and was located north of Buchanan Street and west of the site of today’s West School. The main entrance was just west of the Macoupin County Historical Society.

In 1905 a grandstand was built for harness racing. By 1929 the grounds included several large buildings and the fair was a well established local institution. That year, the county celebrated its centennial. A mammoth parade wound through downtown Carlinville, and a spectacular “Masque and Pageant” was staged in front of the grandstand. It had a cast of 300 locals and was the biggest show the county had ever seen. A few weeks later, early in October, the annual county fair drew large crowds. Then, in late October, 1929, Wall Street crashed. Within a few months, the nation was entering the Great Depression of the 1930s. The old fairgrounds was sold to pay off the board’s debts and the Macoupin County

Fair came to a halt. in 1938, it was revived (see paragraph 4). After four different locations, it finally found its permanent home in 1951, on 25 acres, which was a cornfield, one mile north of Carlinville. The fair started in 1951 as a 4-day fair, and soon was changed to a 6-day fair, due to so many activities. Hundreds of volunteers from the civic groups in the county handle parking, ambulance service, gate-keeping, judging, and security. The operative words for this fair are enthusiasm, dedication, elbow grease and year-round planning. Ed Boente, president of the fair board for 12 years, says, “It’s part of our life, We have a lot of good people involved”. Wayne Harms, chairman of concessions, adds “We have never forgotten that we are an agricultural fair.”

Present day events include harness racing, queen contest, Little Miss and Little Mister contest, demolition derby, tractor pull and truck pull, amateur contests, kids day, Senior Citizens and Nursing Home Days. There is another important factor in the fair’s success. In addition to community involvement, enthusiasm and volunteer help, there is the “Nashville Sound.” In 1968, Porter Wagoner was the first big name act to play the grandstand. (A young, comparatively unknown female singer was scheduled to appear with him, but she was sick that week. Her name was Dolly Parton.) Every year since that time, the fair has presented a star attraction from Nashville. Some of the names included are: Charley Pride, Sonny James, Marty Robbins, Bill Anderson, Louise Mandrell, David Houston and Connie Smith, Conway Twitty, Boxcar Willie, Mel Tillis, Loretta Lynn, Mickey Gilley, Charlie Daniels, Garth Brooks, Sammy Kershaw, Oakridge Boys, Tracy Byrd, Alan Jackson, Pam Tillis, Tanya Tucker, Aaron Tippin, Mark Chestnut, Steve Wariner.

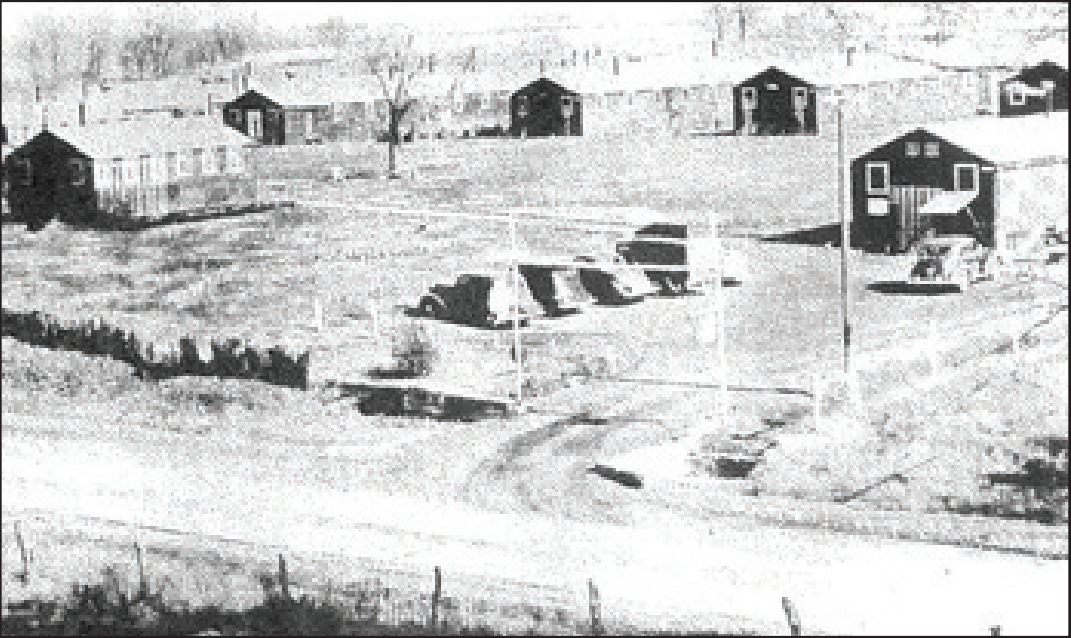
Speaking as secretary for the fair board, I am proud to have served for 50+ years. I just love to work with all of these people — exhibitors and fair-goers. You can’t buy the type of cooperation we get every year. They are all the nicest people in the world. I guess that’s why they call me “Our Fair Lady”.

Our fair is well-known for its food. The food festival group offers daily specials in the dining room from pork chops to steak to lamb. Also available are home made ice cream and elephant ears. We like to keep the same merchant exhibitors coming each year. The McKinney family from Hughes Springs, Texas, has been selling corn dogs at the fair for over 30 years — two generations.

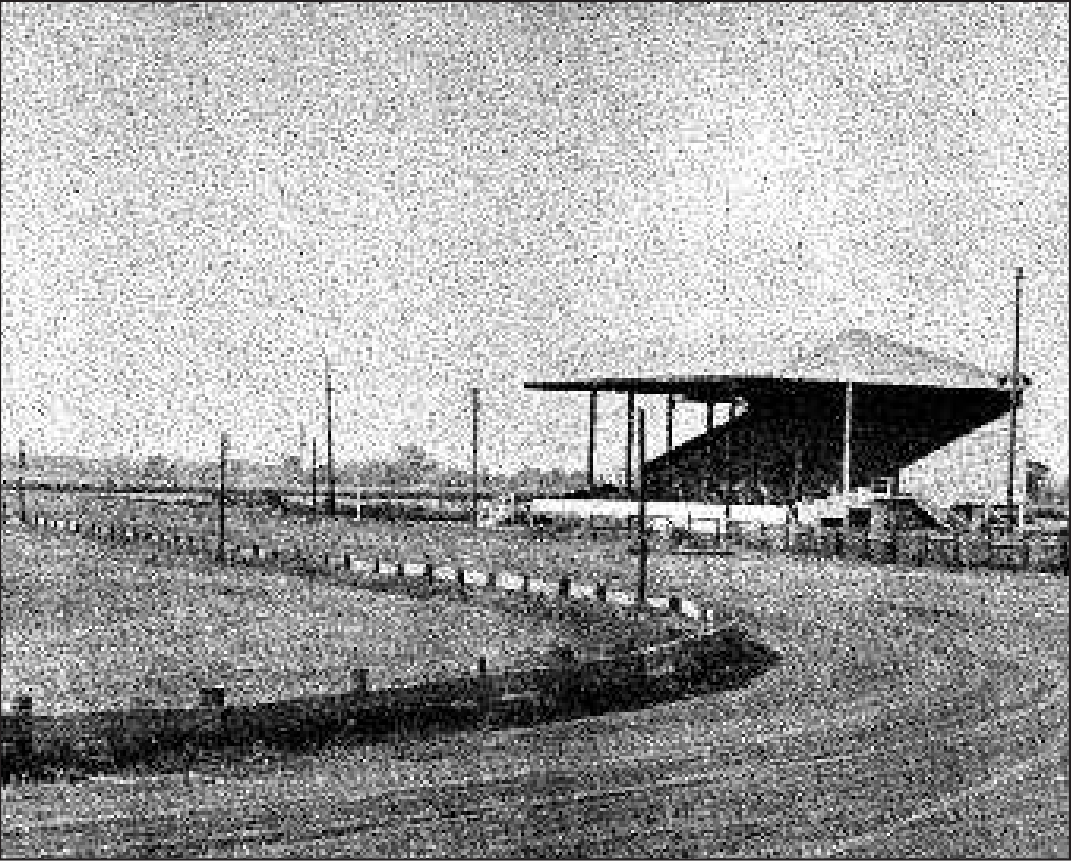
A bit of information concerning ownership of the fairgrounds in the northwest part of Carlinville, near the site of the Macoupin County Historical Society: In a letter from Louis J. Lanzerotti of New Vernon, New Jersey, September 2000, along with his order for a book, comes this information: He is grandson of the former owner of one-half of the old fairgrounds from about 1930-1975 (the Orienti’s).



1912 - Carlinville High School Booth



1938 - Camp Carlinville



1954 - Grandstand and Track



1979 - Chief Ed Eagle



1974 - Aerial View of the Fairgrounds