

OLD FAIRS

Hamilton County, Kansas

Written by Ruth Ausbun

Consultant: "Mrs. Ben Osborne, who has lived in Syracuse, Kansas for about 38 years."

The old Fairs were great periodical markets, some of which were devoted chiefly to one of merchandise. In contrast, others of broader scope afforded most of the district's sales and purchases. Fairs have long been regularly held in many parts of Hamilton County but are not as important as they used to be. They appear to have originated in the church festivals, which offered convenient opportunities for commercial transactions. From the circumstance of place and season, some festivals speedily acquired greater commercial importance than others and drew buyers and sellers from all parts of the country. When the ordinary means of communication and exchange of commodities were very limited, Fairs were of great use. About six years ago, the roads were very scarce, and there were practically no highways. Magistrates of cities found it to their advantage to encourage the Fairs and granted them many privileges. Today the Fairs continue only annually, and the old Fairs have been abolished. Also, as fashions changed, the goods that were exposed for sale at the Fairs changed. Persons of all ranks used to wait for the yearly Fairs to make their principal purchases of manufactured articles.

The Fairs that are of much use during the present day are chiefly the sale of cattle. They are held in the towns and cities. Buyers and sellers who are not only from Hamilton County but also from all parts of the country frequent them. They bring together the cattle for breeding and the grazers (*the cattle being fed for the butcher*). At other large yearly Fairs, lambs and wool were sold. In the early days, thousands of sheep grazed on the buffalo grass, covering the prairie. There may still be hundreds of sheep in one field today if one should drive out in the rural districts.

The boisterous merriment at these Fairs would attract a large gathering of people. Each Fair had its amusing sports, such as football, wrestling, yarning, sack races, flying dragons, soaped pigs, smoking matches, eating hot hasty pudding, whistling, wheelbarrow races, and horse races.

The Fairs were sometimes held at the beginning or end of the snow season. Some, of course, were held during the summer months.

Occasional meetings of people who had goods or wares for sale in an open market were held at a particular place and generally for the transaction of a specific business type.

The Fairs, which were termed "Markets", were usually given to the ladies' fancy bazaars, collections of fine art, etc. But the term 'market' was seldom used for events

here. Many ladies' bazaars continue to be held. It is customary among the churches to have all the members collect old clothing and other items. There they bring together and sell for a small price, usually 5 to 25 cents. This money, of course, goes to the church. The ladies of the church also make quilts, pillows, etc. to sell. Selling cakes, pies, ice cream, etc. is also common among today's churches.

There were also different kinds of Fairs besides the ladies' fancy bazaars. There were also fine art collections, the higher industries for public exhibition, cattle, agricultural Fairs, etc. These were held mainly for amusement.

The Fairs were used as a market for livestock, products, or the surrounding district's commodities. Prizes were given to the best livestock and grains that were marketed. The prize winners always commanded the highest prices, and the owners were given a sum of money in cash. Not every animal was sold at the Fairs, but they did afford a good market for the farmers and ranchers. Other commodities entered at the Fair were; pumpkins, squashes, watermelons, cantaloupes, muskmelons, onions, cabbage, lettuce heads, beets, potatoes, ears of corn, maize, wheat, barley rye, alfalfa grains, quilts, cushions, embroidery work, needlework of all kinds, chickens, pigs, cows, and horses. Today an agricultural Fair of this kind is held during the summer in Syracuse.

The 4-H clubs and different farm groups also held annual Fairs of the same sort in which all the members participated.

There are a good many Fairs and exhibits that are held today. These are mostly among the agriculturists such as 4-H Clubs, school activities, and different agricultural clubs. At the 4-H exhibits, other things are put up, and prizes are given. Among some of the common exhibits at the Fairs are; livestock, various grains, farm crops, sewing articles, and foods, such as cookies, candy, cakes, pies, etc.

Community sales are now taking the place of the Fairs, which, of course, means the Fairs are decreasing. At these sales, the goods for sale are auctioned off to the highest bidder. Everything that one can think of is sold at these sales held once every week in this county at the community sale barn in Syracuse, Kansas. Everything from household goods, implements, livestock, musical instruments, books, tools, cookery utensils, old cars, poultry, canned food, potatoes, grains, land, property, furniture, and junk of all kinds are put up for sale. These sales are mostly attended by rural people and buyers and sellers from all parts of the country. Cows and horses usually bring the highest prices, with pigs following close behind.

One of the stories that Mrs. Osborne (*See Mrs. Ben Osborne, Project Consultant – Hamilton County*) told was about a little boy and girl who took two little pigs to the market on the day of one of the County Fairs. The boy's name was Roy, and the girl's name was Edith. They lived on a large farm that their father had leased or rented for a few years. They were required to pay two hundred and fifty dollars per year rent whether they

raised a crop or not. It was very dry that year and not a sprig of anything was raised. Roy was eleven years old, and Edith was only six years old. Roy heard his father speak very often about having to pay the landlord, or they would be put off the farm without a single place to lay their heads. Even though Roy was rather young, he knew what his father meant. He could hardly sleep at night just thinking about it. Roy sympathized greatly with his beloved parents. So he finally thought of an idea, but he was afraid to consult his parents about it, so instead, he only told his little sister, Edith.

They lived fifteen miles from town, so of course, the parents did not know much about the Fair. But they had said that they were going to town that day. The father said that he would see about marketing his two old hogs, which would weigh about 400 pounds each. Roy had two good-sized pigs that were about six months old. His father said that they would not sell Roy's pigs.

There were not many roads then, only paths worn by the wagon wheels. Early before daybreak, his father hitched his team of mules to his new spring wagon to get ready to start on the journey of the day. They planned on getting back home the next day. The mother decided to stay at home and look after the chickens and one old cow named Peanuts. Edith was also to remain at home to carry water from a well belonging to one of her neighbors, for her mother. She knew about her brother's secret, so it was with deep regret that she stayed behind.

Roy was to go along with his father to help care for the hogs and help keep them from breaking out of their pen fixed for them in the wagon bed.

While the father was eating his breakfast, Edith and Roy slipped out of the doors and loaded Roy's two pigs into the wagon with the other hogs. Roy and his father started immediately for the town, waving goodbye to the ones they had left behind.

They reached town about two o'clock that afternoon. The first sight to meet Roy's eyes was the Fair, located at the edge of town. There was also a circus, and almost every inch of space was crowded with people. The auctioneer was on the platform, getting ready to auction off some cattle. Right across from this was the school building where they had the exhibits, and the ladies were selling ice cream and cake.

Roy's father drove up to the Fair, parked, and began looking for a way he could sell his animals. As his father walked away, Roy got out and looked around. He saw a lot that was petitioned off and a sign with words in big red letters, "Sign your name here to enter in the contest." Roy ran over to the man and immediately signed his name. Two men came over to the wagon and got the pigs before Roy's father got back. Both of the pigs won a prize, first prize for one pig, and the other was awarded third prize. The first prize was \$100, and the third prize was \$25. They went home with enough money to pay the landlord and also brought back Roy's father's two pigs. Roy's pigs are just an example of an actual incident at one of the old-time Fairs.