

THE FIRST FAIR IN KEARNY COUNTY

Kearny County, Kansas

Written by Ruth Ausbun

Consultant: Mrs. Virginia (Pierce) Hicks, Lakin, Kansas

It's believed that the first fair in Kearny County was held at Lakin, Kansas, in August of 1914 and lasted four days. *(Some records give 1917)* The fairground was on Mr. Francis L. Pierce's timber claim situated about three blocks south and one-quarter of a mile west of the new high school building in the west part of town. The fairground is just a little south of their home. *(Mr. Francis L. Pierce was the father of Mrs. Virginia (Pierce) Hicks, the consultant for this story.)*

Two roads were leading into the fairgrounds, one from the east and one from the south. It was an ideal place for the fairground. The race track was in the east corner. Further out east, the bucking broncs were kept in their pens, and on the northeast end of the race track were pens for the chickens, ducks, turkeys, etc. In the center of the fairground was the grandstand. A little north of it was the Ladies Pavilion. Trees were on the west side of the fairground, making it very shady and comfortable in the hot afternoons. There were several rows of walnut trees, cottonwood trees, and also Osage trees.

The next fair held on 16 Aug 1917 and another the following year. The town sponsored the fairs and rodeos held regularly and with much enthusiasm for about ten years. Then the city quit sponsoring them, and of course, everyone lost interest.

The old fairs and rodeos rivaled those held in Garden City, Dodge City, and other neighboring towns.

This fairground was the most beautiful in the west. The beautiful trees and spacious lawn and flowers all made it an attractive place. The people came from far and wide to see the fair because it was also a nice place to picnic and camp.

The weather was sometimes lovely, yet there was also a lot of rain. During the first fair held in Lakin, the story goes that it rained all day through for two days straight. The first day of the fair was a bright sunshiny day with not a cloud in the sky. On this day, the horse races were held. The riders were not local riders but professional riders from Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, and Montana. The judges also gave prizes for the best looking poultry, cows, and horses.

Everyone looked forward to this special occasion, and many hours of planning were spent every year. They were similar to the fairs we have today, but many changes have taken place since then. Many new inventions in Agriculture have taken the place of the old implements used then. If we could visit the old fairs today, we would see tools such as the wheat cradle, a spinning wheel, a scythe used for mowing hay, and a

broad ax for making shingles, a grindstone, possibly a header used for cutting wheat and row crops. There would perhaps be a two-prong pitchfork, an ox yoke, and numerous other things. Instead, we now have the combine for cutting wheat. We have tractors, cultivators, plows pulled by a tractor, trucks to haul produce instead of a wagon, and cars to ride in. We also have electric mixers, electric-sewing machines, electric lights instead of the old coal oil lamps that hung on the walls, modern stoves instead of the old-fashioned wood stove, etc.

Today we have many hobbies, pastimes, entertainments, and amusements that they did not have. In those days, we find that the people would pile in their wagons and spend the whole day with one of the neighbors. They were also fond of horse-racing and hunting, but it was at the community gatherings that the people turned out and enjoyed themselves. The women spent a good part of the summer planning and preparing for the fairs. They made all sorts of needlework crafts, and some of the most beautiful old-fashioned quilts were exhibited. Today these quilts would indeed be outstanding at the World's Fair held in Chicago. They also made some beautiful pillow tops. That was not all that the women did back then for the fairs. They also canned fresh fruits and vegetables. Plus, their fresh vegetables and fruit were also exhibited, which looked like a garden in itself. There were watermelons, pumpkins, squash, cabbage, lettuce, cucumbers, beets, onions, peas, green beans, corn, potatoes, and various wheat grains. The ladies spent a lot of their time baking pies and cakes. Many kinds of cookies were made, but I believe they were better experts at the candy recipes. Their fudge was delicious, but their taffy was unexcelled even by our modern cooks.

There were many lectures during the fairs, given by the local farmers. The ladies gave talks on how to be more successful with their cooking and other home topics. At the first county fair, they had a visiting speaker from another area. This man lectured on temperance. I guess it was a much-needed lecture, but it did not go over very well because of the cowboys, and yes, even the business people and farmers liked their whisky and strong apple cider.

The people working the fairs came from a long distance in covered wagons pulled by two horses, and there was enough room for them to camp out with their wagons and horses. Each person brought enough feed along for their horses and mules. They arrived the evening before the fair began and cooked their food out in the open over a campfire. The first thing they did upon arriving was to drive their wagons over to a tent and unload their stock, products, or whatever they had brought to the fair.

During the fair, the products were graded, and the people were given prizes for the best ones. For example, there were prizes for the best mules or the best cakes, etc. The fair was also used for a market to sell their products. Bidders naturally bid more for the choice animals or products.

A carnival was also held at the fairs. It was an excellent attraction for the children and was also exciting for the grownups, as carnivals did not often appear in the small town of Lakin. The school districts furnished their pupils with a free ticket entitling them to ride all the various things at the carnival and see all the animals.

One day of the fair was devoted to the children. Prizes were given for their exhibits of handiwork, penmanship, and other things that they had made out of wood, cloth, and paper. The children also put on a program where they sang songs, gave readings, and put on plays.

The last day of the fair ended up being a bright sunshiny day. The various implements were exhibited in the morning, and a basket dinner was held for all. During the afternoon, speeches were made by several old-timers. The people all lined up and had an old-fashioned spelling contest. Some say that the teachers and the preacher were the first to take their seats. A fourteen-year-old boy won the contest and was given a prize of ten dollars. The day ended with a big game of horseshoe for the men. A ball was then held that evening, which commenced at 7 o'clock and lasted long into the night. Some of the people started on their journey home. By the end of the next day, the fairground was almost entirely vacated.

Today all that remains of the fairground is a plowed field with only a few trees at the west end.