



the

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Illinois State Fair: The Early Years

Crowds of people of all ages and from every background, enticing aromas wafting through the air, tantalizing exhibits and attractions beckoning for your attention, hot sultry days and cool refreshing buildings to escape the heat. This could only mean it's time for the fair again! This familiar scene has been repeating itself for the last 150 years. The Illinois State Fair maintains a lengthy tradition of demonstrating the best representations in the areas of livestock, culinary skills, machinery, needlework, and much more. The fair is always expanding or changing to accommodate society's evolving tastes. During a landmark year such as this, it seems appropriate to take a journey back to reflect on the fascinating origins of Illinois' annual state fair.

In February 1853, the legislature established the Illinois State Agricultural Society, providing a budget of \$1000 a year for two years. Some of the organizing members believed large periodic fairs were needed to fight the ignorance of farmers. They promoted this notion in the Society's initial publication, the *Transactions of the Illinois State Agricultural Society*, "as they [farmers] read little, and travel less, so has it been the more difficult to induce them to adopt improvements in the art." Society board members met in May of 1853 where they set the first fair to be held in October. The Society thought a fair would help promote agricultural, mechanical and household arts, and specifically, would introduce the latest in farm implements and innovative ideas. The fair also was intended to display the best of livestock and produce and provide an opportunity for farmers to meet and exchange ideas.

Bids were taken to host the event, and Springfield won the right to do so. The first fair was held on a wooded 20 acre site one mile west of the Old State Capitol, a \$250,000 structure completed in 1853. Washington and Monroe Streets, and Douglas and Amos Avenues currently bound the chosen site. The site became Camp Yates in 1861, the place where

Colonel U.S. Grant took command of his troops. Springfield fulfilled all necessary requirements in seeking the fair – to provide a tract of land, fences, necessary buildings, police protection and \$1000 for expenses.

The four-day fair opened on October 11, 1853 with an admission of 25 cents. The attractions included cattle, horses, and sheep venues, among displays of reapers, mowers, farming tools, and a variety of corn planters. On the third day, over 15,000 people attended. The fair was a success, netting \$853 in profits with \$1500 in premiums paid out to prize-winning exhibits. There were a total of 765 entries in all areas.

The next year the fair was supposed to take place in September, but a cholera outbreak caused it to be postponed to October. This fair proved to be just as successful as the first with even more entries and visitors. Senator Stephen Douglas gave a three-hour speech on the opening day of the fair in the hall of the House of Representatives, a heavy downpour of rain hav-

ing caused it to be moved inside. Abraham Lincoln gave the three-hour opposing speech the next day. Premiums were \$3000 that year and there were 1076 entries. The fair then traveled around the state for the next 40 years but returned temporarily in 1879 and 1880, and permanently in 1893. President Rutherford B Hayes, who stopped in Springfield during a western tour, was the highlight of the 1879 state fair. The fair was held in twelve different locations around the state between 1853 and 1893. Large cities and small towns alike hosted from Chicago and Peoria to Olney, Jacksonville, and Ottawa. In 1872, the General Assembly passed legislation changing the Illinois State Agricultural Society to the Illinois Department of Agriculture.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the migratory nature of the fair had become outdated and unnecessary. Transportation no longer posed a problem for farmers because of the increased presence



of railroads. Furthermore, setting up an ever-expanding fair every two years was proving prohibitively expensive to the point that cities no longer sought the opportunity to host the fair. Neighboring states had already established permanent locations, so the time was ripe for Illinois to take that step.

The World's Columbia Exposition in Chicago supplanted the Illinois State Fair in 1893, which gave the State Board of Agriculture time to develop a permanent fair location. The only other times the fair did not take place was 1862 because of the Civil War and 1942-45 when the United States Army used the grounds as an air corps supply depot.

Bloomington, Decatur, Peoria, and Springfield vied for the chance to become the chosen permanent site. Sangamon County and Springfield promised to donate 156 acres north of the city; build a fence and sewage system; provide free electric lights for two years; provide free city water for as long as the fair was held there; and pay a \$50,000 cash payment. The free water offer disappeared during the four-year break caused by WWII. When Springfield was selected, a Peoria newspaper revealed particular resentment to the choice with the remark - "the grass in the streets [of Springfield] would make the farmers feel right at home."

After much celebration by Springfield citizens, they set about getting the grounds ready. The first new structure built after becoming the permanent home was the Exposition Building. The cornerstone of this red brick building was laid on July 4, 1894. Within the cornerstone were placed coins; a picture of Governor Altgeld; documents relating to suffrage and education; and a card discussing the Pullman railroad strike.

On September 24, 1894, a six-day run began with an admission price of 50 cents for adults, 75 cents for one person on horseback, and \$1.25 for a carriage load of four. The fairgrounds contained a racetrack with Springfield's first golf course (four

holes in the infield), a sunstone from the Mormon temple at Nauvoo (returned in 1955), and an artificial lake representing the Mediterranean Sea. A cast of 250 local people entertained with a production of "The Fall of Pompeii" on the man-made lake. Baby contests, a new feature this year, proved to be very popular, as were mule and horse races. The 1894 Illinois State Fair offered premiums of over \$30,000 to exhibitors.

The General Assembly appropriated \$225,000 the next year, which was used to build a number of livestock buildings, a new 8,000-person grandstand, a fire department and the Machinery Hall, which was razed in 1973. An iron-frame glass dome, second largest in size only to the Great Cathedral at Leningrad, was purchased for \$69,500 from the World's Fair in Chicago and reconstructed in Springfield. The Dome Building, as it was called, could reportedly hold about 10,000 people. It was built in time for the 1895 fair and functioned as the fair's horticulture center and held the offices of the Illinois National Guard. Unfortunately, the Dome Building was destroyed in a mysterious fire in August of 1917, just before the fair opened

that year. A great deal of construction took place in the early 1900s as attendance, exhibits, and profits grew. The new construction included the oval shaped Coliseum (1901), Woman's Building (the second one after the first was destroyed in a fire in 1901), and the Dairy Barn (1903). In 1904, a new streetcar service brought visitors to the fair at a rate of one car per minute. Dan Patch, the world's greatest harness horse was a feature that year.

Until 1907, carnivals were not allowed at the Illinois State Fair because fair management wanted to maintain a dignified atmosphere at the fair. When the fair closed at dark, fairgoers then proceeded downtown to the festively decorated square where merchants organized carnivals highlighted by vaudeville and circus acts, rides, food, and music. Initially, wooden arches that could be set up and torn down during special occasions like



A 1901 photograph of the arches and Court House (Old State Capitol) facing west from Sixth Street on Washington Street. Photo courtesy of the Sangamon Valley Collection - Lincoln Library.



A 1901 photograph of the Dome Building with the multiple-domed Exposition Building in the background. Photo courtesy of Illinois State Historical Library.

fair week or welcoming home troops were placed at each corner of the square. Wooden arches gave way to permanent steel ones, which were eventually pulled down in 1921. The arches, brought from the Chicago's World Fair, were wrapped in flags, bunting, and lights to celebrate special events. Strings of lights would outline the Court House (Old State Capitol) and stretch from the dome to the arches. A midway of tent shows and rides in a wooden glen named "Happy Hollow" was finally allowed at the fairgrounds beginning in 1907 rendering the downtown carnivals unnecessary.

Businesses were and still are supportive of the fair's enterprises, possibly understanding what a tremendous marketing venue the fair could be. Sears, Roebuck, and Company built a pavilion in 1909, with displays of machinery on the first floor and a completely furnished bungalow on the top floor. All furnishings, machinery and even the bungalow could be ordered from a Sears catalog. The bungalow still stands today and currently functions as the state fair manager's residence.

In 1918, fair dates were moved from the September and October months to August to avoid the notorious fall rains. The new dates also took advantage of a lull in farmers' schedules, and because the fair was becoming more about family entertain-

ment for non-farming visitors, it was decided the fair should coincide with the traditional family vacation season.

Over a million people visit the fair each year. The crowds and premiums offered are much greater than in the early days. Some buildings like the Exposition Building, once called the "Queen of the Fair", have stood proudly since the fair became a permanent part of Springfield's landscape while others have been replaced or lost to fire. Change is a natural part of the fair's heritage. Some aspects are fixtures of the Illinois State Fair - the old historic buildings' presence, the diverse and abundant selection of fantastic food and rides, and the myriad educational exhibits. The Illinois State Fair began as a means to educate farmers about their craft and provide them an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas. These goals set by the Agricultural Society in 1853 have not changed, but the scope of the educational tools and the audiences have expanded greatly.

Dates for the ten-day event this year are August 9-18. Illinois veterans are the honorary parade marshals during the Twilight Parade on August 8, which begins at 5:45 and kicks off the festivities. Admission is \$3.00 for adults, \$2.00 for senior citizens, and children 12 and under get in for free. During this fair, a commemorative book is available to visitors titled *Illinois State Fair: 150 Year History* in honor of this special anniversary. Additionally, visitors should also stroll through the State Fair Historical Museum at the north end of the Grandstand to gain a better appreciation of the fair's colorful history. History buffs might also be interested in checking out the historical fire museum at the fair where they will find the largest fire safety and antique exhibit in the United States.



Our Bungalow at the Illinois State Fair

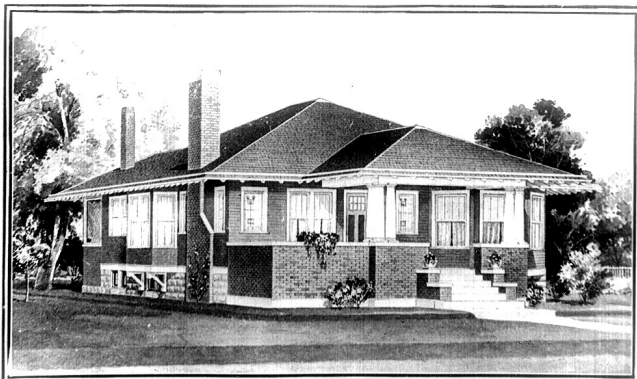
OUR beautiful six-room bungalow and furnishings illustrated in this folder proves our ability to supply you with a complete home and satisfy you in every way.

This handsome dwelling was selected from our Book of Modern Homes and built of materials illustrated and described in our Catalog of Building Material and Mill Work. The furniture and other furnishings were all selected from our big General Catalog and Special Catalogs.

Everything in the bungalow represents the newest ideas for the American home. We suggest you keep a copy of this folder and send other copies to your friends. Let these illustrations remind you that whenever you intend to build, or buy new furniture or other home furnishings, you can obtain the most up to date equipment from us and save money.

We refer you to our Book of Modern Homes, our Building Material and Mill Work Catalog and Lumber List if you intend to build. For your furniture and other home furnishings we refer you to our big General Catalog. These books represent great economies for every family and we guarantee satisfaction.

Sears, Roebuck and Co., Chicago.



Exterior View of the Beautiful Six Room Bungalow.

Sears Bungalow constructed on the fairgrounds in 1909. Currently it is the home of the State Fair manager. Photo courtesy of Illinois State Historical Library.

The Butter Cow Tradition Continues

The Butter Cow has been a fair tradition for more than 75 years. With the exception of 1997, Norma "Duffy" Lyon crafted the Illinois State Fair's butter cows out of about 600 pounds of butter for the last 31 years. She was honored as the Grand Marshal of the fair in 2001, her last year for sculpting this fair favorite. Nancy Hise, a cheese carver hailing from Madison, Wisconsin is making her debut attempt at creating the beloved butter cow this year. She starts the task on July 27 and hopes to complete it in four days.



Illinois Artisans at Work

The Illinois State Fair is all about celebrating the best of what our state has to offer – agricultural products, needlework, governmental services and entertainment for the whole family. As an extension of this celebration, the crafts of artisans living and working in Illinois will be featured near the Main Gate and adjacent to Ethnic Village. At Illinois Artisans Village, about 12 artisans will demonstrate their talents in producing such traditional crafts as blacksmithing, basketry, jewelry making, wood carving, and painting on various materials. All demonstrations are conducted by members of the Illinois State Museum Artisans Program daily from 10 am to 7 pm. Additionally, glass blowers from the SIU-Carbondale glass arts studio will demonstrate the art of glass blowing daily at a mobile studio. The Illinois Artisans Village is brought to the Illinois State Fair as a result of First Lady Lura Lynn Ryan's leadership and efforts to promote the work of Illinois artisans. It is also supported by the Office of the Governor; the Department of Agriculture; the Illinois State Museum – a division of the Department of Natural Resources; and the Illinois Arts Council.



The Day the Fair Almost Disappeared

In 1922, Governor Len Small (R- Kankakee) sought changes to the original deed clearly designating Illinois' ownership of the fairgrounds. A clause in the deed stipulated that if the fair did not take place for two years in a row, the land and improvements would revert to Sangamon County. A year earlier, the legislature passed an appropriation of \$450,000 for improvements to the grounds, but the Governor insisted all claims to the land be given up before the money was released. The county agreed to change the deed, but the \$450,000 remained unused. Some Chicagoans wanted to see the Springfield fair abandoned in favor of a horse racetrack in Chicago's Grant Park. The \$450,000 was removed from the 1923 appropriation bill, but while still in the House, it was placed back in. On June 6, 1923, Senator Earl B. Searcy (R-Springfield) learned of an attempt to delete the appropriation, and tried to gain support from other senators. Senator H.G. Wright, (R – DeKalb) the chairman of the Senate appropriations committee asked that the \$450,000 be stricken from the bill. Searcy moved to table the Wright motion, and a debate ensued lasting for hours, eventually concluding with a roll call. A tie vote of 24-24 resulted. Searcy stalled for time while a Springfield lawyer Samuel D. Scholes searched for someone to break the tie in Springfield's favor. He successfully pled the case to Democratic Chicago Senator John T. Denvir, a personal friend of Searcy's, who then cast the tie-breaking vote in support of Searcy. The fair was saved, and a major building program was initiated.



Illinois State Fair Trivia

- In 1910, the current main gate was built.
- In 1924, 210 acres were acquired bringing the total to 366.
- In 1926, the first hog calling contest took place.
- In 1930, Veterans Day at the Fair was established.
- In 1933, beer was sold for the first time at the fair.
- In 1937, state fair attendance passed a million for the first time.
- In 1967, a 30 foot fiberglass statue of Abraham Lincoln was erected.
- In 1968, the Giant Slide was installed near the main gate.

Sources for trivia and rest of Cook-Witter report from the Sangamon Valley Collection – Lincoln Library

Sources: "Do You Remember?" *State Journal Register* 4 July 1974: 28. ; Henry, Patricia. "Illinois State Fair: Then and Now." *Supplement to Illinois Magazine* (July – Aug. 1984): 1A – 8A. ; Newton, David. "The Illinois State Fair: Farmers the Focus of First Fairs." *Historic Illinois* 13.2 (Aug. 1990): 2 – 14. ; Sands, Stephan. "State Fair links people, products, past." *LifeTimes* (Aug. 1988): 5.; "Searcy Saved Fair." *Illinois State Journal* 12 Apr. 1936: 3.; "Springfield Closed Up Hog Holes, Fixed Streets For First Fair In 1853." *Illinois State Register* 15 July 1952: 2.



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