

PART TWO: THE SMITHVILLE FAIR RETURNS

By Christine E. Buck

This is the seventh article in a series submitted by the Town of Smithville Bicentennial Committee.

Autumn was the season for agricultural fairs. People missed the Smithville Fair and longed to bring it back.

The Smithville Agricultural Society, the fair's sponsoring organization, was reborn in September of 1877. After ten years since the last fair, the group elected officers and board members and formed a location committee to find a new fairground site. We don't know why the old location north of today's Community Center was abandoned.

Within weeks, the fair had a new home. The Society leased the flats on the Smith Hotchkiss farm. This is the brick house farm on the road to McDonough, formerly owned by the Urda brothers. The broad flats across the road from the farmhouse would become the site of the next fair.

It was too late that season for a fall fair, but preparations began for the following year's event. First priority? A racetrack.

While the racetrack may have been updated after its 1877 construction, it is clearly and eerily evident in aerial photos of the Urda farm on internet map sites such as Google, Yahoo, and MSN.

Fairground activities began the next summer with a walking match on the new track. W. L. Rogers of Greene, an amateur, was pitted against Professor J. E. Keyes, a McDonough professional, formerly from Long Island. The Professor had never lost a race. The match was for four of seven half-mile heats. Rogers won the first four heats, upsetting the Professor's perfect record.

By late September the fairgrounds were ready, with a large dancing hall, grandstand, ticket booth, and Floral Hall. The Association published its objectives: to make an entertaining opportunity for farmers to discuss agricultural issues such as the best stock to raise, the most profitable way to work up their milk, and the best way to raise crops. For ladies, the fair was to provide a chance to visit, exhibit, and have a delightful holiday.

The comeback fair of 1878, *the 11th Annual Fair of Smithville and Other Towns*, was more successful than anyone had anticipated. Opening day featured foot races and horse races. The Greene Cornet Band entertained, and Peter Guier's orchestra from Whitney Point—one of the best in the State—played for the dances.

Attendance on the second day was between 3,000 and 4,000. In fact, so many exhibitors appeared that the eight men working could not register everyone.

G. R. Lyon (predecessor to the Raymond Corporation) displayed agricultural equipment popular with the men, while women flocked to Greene milliner Mrs. Langdon's display of stylish hats.

The *Chenango American* covered the horse races in detail. The State's fastest trotting stallion—*Pathfinder*—was entered for a race.

Other evidence of the fair's success: no injuries, no runaway horses, no broken wagons, and no noise complaints. Society-appointed policemen in the road and at the gate kept order and made only one arrest.

Just a few of the prizewinners were David Winchell, best working oxen; Peter Eaton, pair of matched colts; Lyman Church, 50 pounds of butter; Mrs. L.J. Purdy, embroidered pillowcase; Mrs. Henry Adams, loaf of Indian bread.

At fair's end, the Association came up short of prize money. It had been a very expensive first year with investments at the new site. Further, gloomy weather the third day reduced admission income. But prizewinners were announced and were promised their cash the following week. Donations were made toward the shortfall, and some winners waived their prizes. To earn needed income, the Society planned an October horse race.

Drought marked the autumn of 1880 (as it did again in 1881 and 1882). 5,000 fairgoers—an overflowing crowd—attended on the fair's second day. Horse pulls and ox pulls were popular. The main attraction was the visit of Onondaga and Oneida Nation members, who had traveled by train to the Greene railroad station. Each tribe's fleetest runner competed in a foot race.

The fair's third day brought even more fairgoers than the day before. They came to witness a game of Lacrosse between the Onondagas and Oneidas. According to a Fort Stanwix official, Lacrosse was so named because the original sticks that held the hard ball looked like the crook carried by the Bishop of the Catholic Church.

With each player in costume, the game was a novelty. It was lively and spirited, and the teams played with skill, throwing and stopping the ball with their nets.

We have a first-hand glimpse of this fair and of Smithville, thanks to David M. Purdy. He donated an original 1880 fair program to the Smithville Historical Society this spring and noted that his four great-grandfathers, as well as other family members, were active in the fair—the Purdys, Skillmans, and Jacobsons.

Information published in the booklet is found nowhere else, such as that year's Society officers—fifty-nine names. The three-day schedule of events was listed, as well as the fair's rules and regulations. There were rules for fairgoers (no gambling, among others), and rules for judges, exhibitors, and horse races. A list of all 461 categories of competition appeared. And if that weren't enough, prizes were offered in a discretionary, or "anything goes," category.

The publication's advertisements give some insight into Smithville's business history and to the humor of the time:

With tongue in cheek, Dr. A. L. Lowe's ad in the booklet hoped that his friends would, "allow themselves to be run over with horses, gored by fierce steers, bunted down by angry rams, be bitten by belligerent porkers, or mutually pound each other in order that he may bind up their wounds, cover them with liniments, speak words of cheer to their troubled hearts, and deplete their pocketbooks."

W. A. Adams, proprietor of the Smithville House hotel and livery (now Seeber's), announced he had recently remodeled to accommodate commercial travelers.

C. E. Keough advertised that his store sold drugs and medicines, groceries, pure wines and liquors, dye, butter colors, and fancy articles.

The Central Valley House no longer stands in Smithville Flats. An imposing hotel, it was operated then by John Landers and his son Ebbin. Its satirical ad mentioned the hotel's amenities, one of which was that when out-of-town guests sat on the piazza viewing Tanner's mill pond and Hoag's mountain, "interesting remarks will be made at this time by local wits upon the need of rain, number of grass-hoppers, etc."

The Smithville Cornet Band announced availability of its finely uniformed eighteen pieces, with drum major, for firemen's parades, military musters, picnics, and excursions.

An ad for J. B. Lewis' hardware store listed tinware, cook and parlor stoves, and farming tools as his specialties. And J. D. Livermore & Company advertised ready made suits, as well as dry goods and groceries.

Fair activities continued the following two years despite the drought: foot races, bicycle races, horse races, and exhibits. One piece of pre-fair excitement was that as men prepared to paint and repair the fair's cattle pens, they were chased by Mr. Hotchkiss's free-running bull, bellowing and throwing dirt. The men found their escape inside the cow pens.

In early September of 1883, people wondered why there had been no word of the fair from "the enthusiasm that five years ago this summer built one of the best tracks and fairgrounds in Chenango County."

Then..."The Smithville Fair has gone up—no—down. Well it has collapsed for the year 1883, anyway."

The collapse was permanent, as it turns out. Its finality was recorded in the Riverside Agricultural Society's meeting minutes as they geared up to put on Greene's first fair in 1884. The group approved purchasing the grandstand and judges' stand from the Smithville Agricultural Society, "at the prices quoted."

It may have been competition from other fairs, lack of funds, lack of manpower, drought, or simply changing times that caused the fair's demise. But it went out on a high note...reported as a success its final year.

After Smithville's stint, fairgoers and exhibitors could—and still can—continue the agricultural fair tradition at nearby town and county fairs, or at the State Fair. Now tractor pulls have replaced ox pulls, and horse races have given way to auto races, but the spirit lives on.

End note: Information about the Smithville Fair came from the Chenango American archives, a taped memoir of Will Loomis, the fair booklet contributed by Mr. Purdy, and photocopies of two old images preserved by William House. My wish list, on behalf of the Smithville Historical Society: minutes and ledgers of the Smithville Agricultural Society, photos of the fair or its abandoned buildings, a fair poster, and fair memorabilia.