

## COME TO THE FAIR!

By Christine E. Buck

Imagine an autumn day in 1858. Throngs of people stream to Smithville Flats. Men and boys on foot are driving oxen, horses, and cattle. Wagons bounce along country roads, laden with bountiful farm produce and cackling poultry. Women carry needlework and baked goods.

Who knew Smithville hosted an agricultural fair that drew fairgoers by the thousand? It makes sense. Smithville was a town known for agriculture. Who knew that Smithville's fair was an early one, compared to many towns? Three years before the Civil War began, the Smithville Agricultural Society hosted its first annual town fair.

Actually, there are two separate histories of the Smithville Town Fair. Two different locations touched four different decades: the 1850s, 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. And there is a tie with Greene and its fair, started in 1884.

Picture Smithville's first fairground on the flats north of today's Community Center—the west side of State Highway 41. A wide, level horseracing track had been laid out and graded. A judges' stand and a large exhibit hall were erected on the fairgrounds.

The late Will Loomis recalled hearing how that main exhibit hall was built: *I was told that when they built that fair house, a gang of men went to the woods and chopped the trees down and hewed the trees and formed the timbers and had the frame all up that night. That's quite a stunt, all right. Take a tree and put up a building in a day.*

Fences and watering troughs were installed. We can assume other buildings went up on the fairgrounds as well— a grandstand, a ticket booth, and barns to shelter livestock.

From year to year the fair varied, but some themes were constant. It was held either in September or October. By then the autumn harvest work was done, and farmers had time for recreation and friendly competition.

Fairgoers flocked to the festivities from the countryside and surrounding towns—German, McDonough, Oxford, Greene, Willet, and Triangle. Exhibitors and visitors came from as far away as Guilford and Marathon. Admission was twelve cents.

The fair was scheduled to last two or three days. The first day was devoted to exhibitors driving their livestock to the fairgrounds, registering, and setting up exhibits.

In advance of each fair, the *Chenango American* listed the categories of competition, the judges' names, and the cash prizes offered. Competitors had

to belong to the agricultural society, paying an annual membership fee of \$1.00. After the fair, the newspaper printed every prizewinner's name.

Exhibitors competed in a wide variety of categories: oxen, cattle, and horses; sheep, swine, and fowl. Fruits and vegetables. Butter and cheese. Needlework, baked goods, and flowers. Horseback riding, trotting matches. And more. Prizes ranged from twenty-five cents to three dollars.

While men handled the livestock entries and horse races, women were in charge of the exhibit building, called *Floral Hall*. The ladies arranged the exhibits and decorated the hall. For several years running, a newspaper reporter complained of having to enter Floral Hall and mesh with hordes of women wearing rigid, voluminous hoopskirts. He felt he was "twisted and turned out, somewhat like a fleece of wool going through a carding machine, only I didn't come out quite so slick."

Entertainment was always offered at the fair, maybe a brass band or a military band. Horse races, their emphasis and prize money growing each year, seemed important to drawing a crowd. On the closing day, an agricultural orator spoke, and a dance or party the final evening ended the festivities.

Opening day of the first fair was one hundred fifty years ago—on September 16, 1858. Just as now, weather conditions can make or break an outdoor event. People woke that morning to a rainy and disagreeable day, causing most to stay home. But day two was unusually beautiful. The rain had settled the dusty grounds, and exhibitors and fairgoers came out.

The *Chenango American* reporter wrote about the particularly fine livestock and named their owners. In the ladies' department, he noted that Mrs. G. R. Lyon of Greene exhibited a bed quilt made of 3,125 pieces. Vendors displayed dental equipment, farm equipment, paintings, and ambrotypes. Smithville's Mrs. F.D. Bunnel took first prize for her skill in horsemanship.

Willard's Saxe Horn Band from Greene entertained with music. Frank Cunningham, the day's orator, gave "a most eloquent and touching" agricultural address. On display at the fair was a beautiful flag, lent by Greene's Ocean Fire Company. Wiles' Hotel [now Seeber's] hosted a dance the final evening. All in all, the fair was a great success.

The fair continued annually, with reports each year of weather conditions, attractions, and improvements. Some interesting items from those first years: a display of McMoran knives [made in Genegantslet]; a black and tan terrier pup from Greene named *Canadian Nell*, who stole everyone's heart; a clever, newly-patented clothes reel that would fold up when not in use; a new invention—a clothes washing machine; prizes for fruit wines, often won by women.

Fair news in the *Chenango American* declined as the Civil War raged on; the newspaper's columns were filled with reports of the latest battles. In 1862, after the schedule had been announced, the fair was cancelled suddenly. All

**towns were distracted by filling their quotas of volunteer soldiers before the draft was to take place.**

**The fair came back to life the following year, seemingly as before, despite the war. Farmers displayed horses, cattle, sheep, and vegetables. L. H. Alling exhibited twenty-six pear varieties from his orchard. The women showed their embroidery, knitting, and carpets, their jellies and cakes. Trotting and pacing races drew professionals for a purse of several hundred dollars.**

**In what we might call a hose fight, an 1866 competition offered \$50 to the fire company who could throw water the greatest distance. Smithville's Genegantslet Fire Company beat Greene's Ocean Fire Company, but a question arose about how distance was affected by the equipment's capacity.**

**After a splendid report of the 1867 fair, with the fairgrounds in "proper order," there was no more fair news and no more fair. What happened? We don't know. The fair was revived a decade later, but at a new location. Do you know where?**

**To Be Continued**