

A History of the Fulton County Fair (established in 1919)

Events and exhibits have changed but the reason for a county fair has not changed. It gives the people of Fulton County a chance to come together and showcase their many talents. Fairs are a source of recreation and amusement but they are also an educational event. Many new ideas are gained from seeing a fair exhibit. Youth learn about the care of livestock and gain skills that will help them throughout life.

Records show that the first Fulton County Fair Association was formed in September of 1919. It was a for-profit organization and memberships were sold for \$5 each. Incorporators were C. W. Pardew, E. M. Reaves, J. T. Livingston, Race Humphries and Lamar Waters. In later years it was changed to a non-profit organization. No records are available on who formed this association.

The exact date of the first fair in Fulton County is not known but it was thought to be in 1919 or 1920. Records show that 4,000 people were at the 1921 fair and came by wagon and the new Model T Ford car. The events were horse races, trick riders and baseball. At the early fairs many people camped at the fair which gave them a chance to visit with neighbors.

Vester Williams, a long time historian of Fulton County, tells in his August 25, 1966 newspaper article that schools played a big part in the fair. During the early fairs schools would compete at the county fair in recitations, spelling and ciphering matches and in athletic contests.

During the depression and war years the group did not hold a county fair.

The fair resumed in the early 1950's at the old high school. Some of the board members in the early 50's were Obed Maguffee, Jim Bob Plumlee, Linn Thomas, Hester Harris, Ora Campbell, and Iris and Nell Everett. Today these board members have children and grandchildren, and great grandchildren who are involved in fair.

Sometime prior to 1955 the fair relocated to Preacher Roe Ball Park. Arnold Cheek was the fair manager in 1955 and some of the other board members were: Walter Nesbitt, Ray Hester, George Meyer, Everett Lowrance, and Clarence Morris. Admission to the 1955 fair was 25 cents for children and 50 cents for adults.

The fair board selected youth to assist the adults with the fair exhibits in 1970. Beef cattle superintendents were John Brink and Forest Bassham; dairy cattle was supervised by Raydean Prewett and Roger Kinder. Wayne Southard and Jim Watkins were in charge of poultry and rabbits. Margaret Holland and Debbie Caldwell were women's department superintendents. Lora Owens and Marilyn Benton were in the flower department. Iris Everett and Kerry Roberts served as horticulture supervisors and Clessie Watson and Aileen Paysinger were in charge of educational exhibits.

Attendance and activities grew and Preacher Roe Park was not big enough for the fair any

more. In 1973 there was a fire in one of the fair buildings that was being used by Tri-County Shirt Factory. The fair board made the decision to re-locate to a larger area. The community came together and 10 acres of land was purchased by the City of Salem with help from the Fulton County Fair Association, Ozark Mountain Music Makers, and North Arkansas Electric Cooperative. This land included the current city pool and the club house. This became the home of the OMMM weekly Saturday night show, the county fair, and NAEC=s annual meeting. A contest was held to name the facility and Betsy Benton was the winner with the name ASalem Civic Center.@ The theater building and the current cattle barn were added to the civic center and the 1973 county fair was held in the new location. Some of the fair officials involved in making this move were Mayor Gary Clayton, Norma Ferguson, Ronald Plumlee, Doraine Paysinger, Louise Ferguson, and Owen Biles. In the late 1970's a second barn was added to the Fairgrounds/Civic Center Complex.

Tractor pulling was soon added to the fair events and there was a need for an arena for tractor pulling, rodeos and other sporting events. In 1985 the Fulton County Fair Association purchased 10 acres of land that joined the fairgrounds from Ron and Gail Plumlee and expanded the Civic Center/Fairgrounds facility to 20 acres. Fulton County donated labor to construct a 2,000 seat arena, concession stand and restrooms. Board members involved in this expansion were Jim Walling, Ronald Plumlee, Jackie Clayton, Doraine Paysinger, Sherry Clayton, Frank Rowlett and Noble and Carolyn Lewis.

A third livestock barn was constructed in 2001 with a Dept. of Rural Services grant to house swine. Additional acreage for parking was donated to the Fulton County Fair by Ron and Gail Plumlee in 2003 and two new parking areas were constructed for the arena area.

The Hickinbotham-Miller Building was completed in 2004 with GIF grant funds from Representative Boyd Hickinbotham and Senator Paul Miller. The 7,000 square foot climate controlled building has a full kitchen and is used for creative arts exhibits during the fair and by the community throughout the year for youth camps, meetings, family reunions, weddings, and other events.

The fair continued to grow with the new exhibit building in place and in 2006 a 60 x 100 ft. show arena was constructed to be used for livestock shows. This facility was named the Everett Show Arena in honor of long-time Fulton County Judge and State Representative Curren Everett.

In 2011, the Fulton County Fair board of directors entered into a long-term lease on the Salem Civic Center with the City of Salem. Over \$40,000 was spent on the renovation of the Civic Center making it a comfortable facility for meetings, beauty pageants, and concerts. However, in December of 2013 tragedy struck and the Salem Civic Center structure collapsed under the weight of ice and snow build-up. Fulton County was declared a disaster area by President O-Bama and Governor Mike Beebe thus qualifying the City of Salem and the Fulton County Fair Association for FEMA assistance to replace the building and contents. City officials, fair board members and community leaders made the decision to do an improved project and re-locate the Salem Civic Center to another area on the fairgrounds and make it larger than the original structure. Community leaders and Fulton County officials stepped up to assist in this project. Additional funding was acquired from within the community and on July 22, 2016 the fair took possession of

the new 13,500 square ft. facility and used it for the county fair the following week having special days for veterans, seniors, and kid's in the new facility as well as the beauty pageants, youth talent contest and a concert. Future events such as concerts and trade shows are already in the planning stages to bring people to Salem and Fulton County.

Also in 2016, a new 60 x 125 ft. livestock barn was completed adjacent to the present show arena. The new barn was named for long time fair board member and Viola Vocational Agriculture Teacher Jim Walling and is the Jim Walling Livestock Center. A large portion of the construction costs on the new livestock facility was donated by former students, community organizations, businesses and individuals.

The Fulton County Fair officials are all volunteers and work year-round to improve the Fulton County Fair. New ideas for improving the fair are always welcome.