

# Decades Of The Lancaster Fair

The roots of the Lancaster Fair began to grow from seeds planted in 1870, as the Coös and Essex Counties Agricultural Society. The Society worked with another recently formed group named the Riding Park Association of Coös County. The Riding Park Association purchased a 20-acre parcel of property from the Emmons's Stockwell farm. It was located on the main road to Northumberland. On this site, they created one of the finest tracks of its day. The two organizations appeared to have worked out an agreement and apparently sponsored many races and other events. Unfortunately the two groups abandoned the work and the property was sold to George Rowell, a resident of New York and former resident of Lancaster. In 1884, he resurrected the Coös and Essex Counties Agricultural Society, which was headed by Edward Spaulding. It featured horse racing and jumping, wrestling and bicycle racing. The fair did well but eventually closed down, then was revived once again by a group of local men. The new organization was called the Lancaster Driving Club.



In 1902, the Coös and Essex Counties Agricultural Society was reformed by John Costello, marking the birth of the true Lancaster Fair. In February 1902, a meeting was held at which members were appointed. Frank Smith was named president, Manasah Perkins vice president, John McIntire secretary, and J.D. Howe treasurer. Other directors were elected from surrounding New Hampshire towns, including Lancaster, Northumberland, Jefferson, Whitefield, Dalton, Stratford, Stark, Berlin, and Gorham as well as the Vermont towns of Guildhall, Lunenburg and Maidstone. The first Fair was held in September of that year. It included racing, baseball, exhibits, and other stage acts. Governor Chester Jordan was present. He was born in Colebrook and lived in Lancaster.



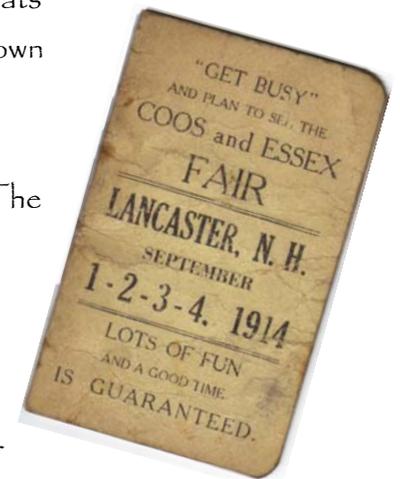


During the years from 1907 to 1916, the Fair increased its purses for racing from \$800 to \$1,800. The Fair built the Floral and Exhibition Hall in 1917. The Exhibition Hall was renamed and is currently Alexander Hall, named after Frank Alexander, the superintendent of the grounds of the Lancaster Fair for 27 years.

In 1916, the Fair reported about \$4,500 in gate receipts and an attendance of over 5,000. The directors even considered building a subway-like tunnel under the horserace track to the infield to accommodate all the foot traffic. Exhibitors were numerous by this time.

In 1912, there was a barnstorming pilot flying the newly invented airplane. He flew many times and actually crashed into some trees in the back of the fairgrounds. This was also the year that the fair directors voted to extend the fair from three to four days and also increased the admission tickets from thirty-five cents to a whopping fifty cents. Henry Hale, owner of the Balsams Hotel exhibited his seven thousand dollar horse and three thousand dollar cow. Automobile parades and floats were also a big attraction and Lancaster's own Col. Francis L. Town entered his own automobile.

During the 1920s the Lancaster Fair saw many ups and downs. The economy was not very robust during this time and the Fair was competing with Chautauqua programs. These were adult educational "summer camps", very popular during this age. Gambling was very popular and revenue agents were always present looking for violators of the Volstead Act. The Lancaster



Fair continued to grow and attendance was increasing yearly, with the exception of bad-weather years. The parade of automobiles was abandoned and replaced with a cattle parade. In 1925, the Lancaster Fair had its first night entertainment with the use of lights. There is no record of what the entertainment was.

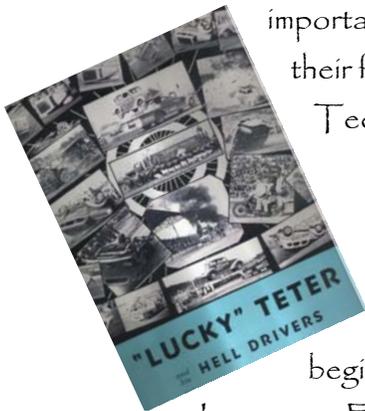


The 1930s brought the era of the "Girlie Shows", which seemed to be sweeping the nation. With a decline in attendance of agricultural fairs nationwide, the "Girlie Shows" became a staple of Lancaster Fair entertainment.

The agricultural events continued to grow but with the Great Depression spreading across the entire country money was not being spent by fairgoers, nor was the Fair growing financially. Some events did continue, one of which was the hand hay-cutting contest. One of the participants in this contest was Sinclair Weeks, then mayor of Newton, Massachusetts and future United States Secretary of Commerce. Weeks promoted the Fair and was a huge reason for it's survival during the Great Depression. He was responsible for bringing cavalymen from Fort Ethan Allen in 1936, which was an outstanding attraction for the fairgoers. Jay Benton, another Massachusetts businessman, and also a great promoter of the Fair, was responsible for the creation of the Milkmaids Milking Contest, another



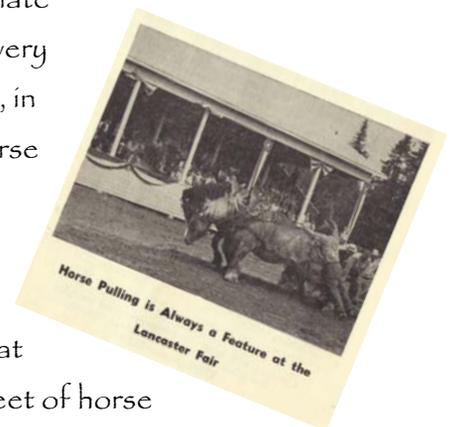
important attraction during the 1930s. The first "Hell Drivers" also made their first appearances during the 1930s, including the famous Lucky Teeter.



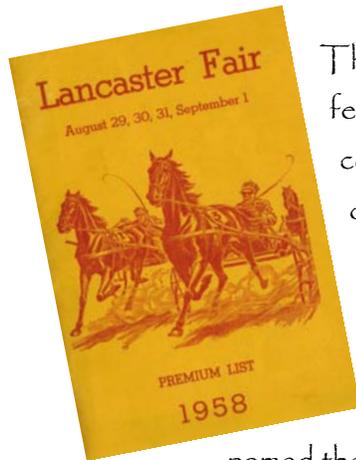
The 1940s would bring our nation into the Second World War. The early part of the decade would see very little growth of the fair with rather lackluster attendance. The only year since its beginnings that the Lancaster Fair would not be held was 1944. The Lancaster Fair directors felt it would be inappropriate in the face of the all-out sacrifices being demanded of the nation at that time. To date, this was the only time since 1902 that the Lancaster fair was not held. The following year, with the end of the war, the fair had its largest to date attendance.

The Lancaster Fair continued to grow during the 1950s with the United States Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks on board as an associate director and harness racing packing in the crowds. Each and every year continued to see the attendance and revenues grow. This, in turn, allowed the Fair to build new buildings and offer more diverse shows, performances and contests.

That was true right up until 4pm on a Thursday afternoon in 1955, when the day before the Fair (it was only a 4-Day event at this time) was to open, a disastrous fire destroyed almost 400 feet of horse sheds as well as a small grandstand that seated about 500 people. Animals were removed in time and not one perished. Thanks to the resilience of the Fair directors as well as its workers the event went off without a hitch. Car thrill shows with Buddy

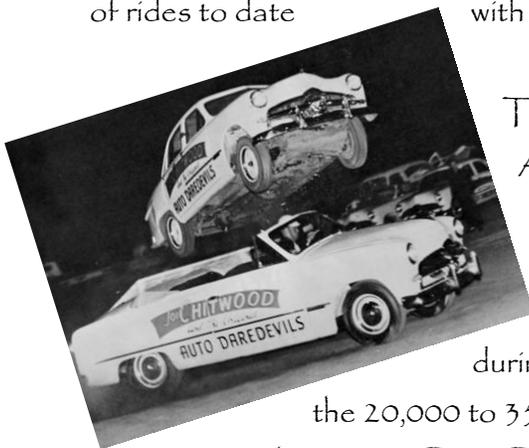


Wagner and Joie Chitwood, harness racing and horse pulling, as well as celebrity entertainers kept the Fair on its path of growth.



The 1960s did not start out strong, with the 1960 Fair one of the few times that attendance did not grow. The reason for this was cold, rainy weather throughout the weekend. Labor Day, the last day of the fair was one of the largest to date, which helped the fair recover to some degree. The fair continued to chart new waters with its entertainment. In 1961, the Tournament Of Thrills was a record-breaking attraction that consisted of jousting from cars. The event debuted on a television show named the "Summer Sports Spectacular" on the night before they appeared at the Lancaster Fair. Entertainment throughout the decade continued with the ever popular car shows along with stage shows such as high wire performers and various circus-like acts. In 1963 the Zacchini family wowed audiences with their act in which all six family members were fired out of cannons and flew some 100 feet through the air. Celebrity appearances during this time included Myron Floren (a popular accordionist for the Lawrence Welk Show) and Dick Curless. The now famous Snell's Restaurant was built in 1965.

As the Fair rolled into the 1970s, many local organizations saw this as an opportunity to raise money by renting space for concessions. Some of the organizations that took advantage of the concessions and booths were the Littleton Lions, Lancaster Rotary, Weeks Memorial Hospital Auxiliary, the Groveton Knights Of Columbus, the Mt. Prospect Ski Club and the Groveton Methodist Men with food booths. The Fair expanded the parking areas, which freed up plenty of space that was desperately needed for concessionaires and rides. The Fair had the largest number of rides to date with 19 rides in 1971.



The Joie Chitwood Thrill Show with his "Danger Angels" were the main attraction with John Langill, owner of Langill Shows, providing all the midway rides. John Langill partnered with John Lemos in 1976, to form L & L Amusement. Attendance during the 1970s increased every year, but stayed within the 20,000 to 35,000 range, with the then all time record being set in 1977, with 34,653. Bugs Bunny and the Looney Tunes characters made

appearances during the '70s. In 1976, the fair went all out to celebrate the country's Bicentennial with entertainers Hank Snow, Judy Lynn, and the famous Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. The Fair also increased from 4 to 5 days, and introduced half-priced rides.



The 1980s began with a buzz, the buzz of Helicrafts. Sharkey's Helicrafts became well known in the '80s and led to some of the Fair's current helicopter rides. With the economy still in a recession, the Fair did surprisingly well, probably due to great weather, with 1980 being the first time that the Lancaster Fair had a



complete 5 days of no rain whatsoever. The attendance for the 1980 Fair set another record with 35,073 in attendance. 1982 saw the tradition of a demolition derby on Labor Day began. A fiddlers' contest was also added that same year. The Joie Chitwood Show continued to be a staple for Friday night entertainment, as it did throughout most of the '70s. A loggers' day was introduced during

the '80s as well. Acts that headlined during the '80s included Lynn Anderson, Glen Campbell, Jim Stafford, and Roy Clark. All in all the fair continued to see growth at the gates and on the grounds themselves, despite some poor weather throughout most of the decade.

The '90s started out rather soggy to say the least, with rain the first 2 years. In 1990, Lancaster hosted the American Rodeo Association's first New Hampshire sanctioned rodeo ever held in New Hampshire. It was a huge hit with over 2,000 spectators. Despite the rain, 1991 set the all-time attendance record to date, with 37,800 during the 6 day event. This was the first year that the Fair had extended its 5 days to 6. Controversy arose in 1991 as the fair replaced the oxen pulling with an oxen obstacle course. This change was not received very well by long-time oxen pullers.

This was also the year for the first appearance of the Budweiser Clydesdales, a huge success. 1992 the Fair's attendance increased once again to a grand total of 42,700. With all the rain for the first part of the 1990's, the Monster Truck Shootout was a perfect fit. The more mud the merrier. In 1993 the Fair tried holding the events on any other weekend other than Labor Day, the first time ever. They



recorded yet another record attendance of 46,800 admissions. This practice continued until the 1996 Fair, which saw the permanent return of the Lancaster Fair to Labor Day Weekend.

The 1990s also saw the midway amusement ride contractors change from L&L, to Smokey's, to Pino. Entertainment included the Bellamy Brothers, Waylon Jennings, Lynn Anderson, Holly Dunn, Tammy Wynette, Hank Thompson, Tiny Tim, and the Forrester Sisters to name just a few.



Ushering in the new millennium the Lancaster Fair has continued to be a pillar in the North Country and its agricultural community. The Fair has continued to provide great entertainment such as the likes of Aaron Tippin, Charlie Daniels, and the Oak Ridge Boys. In an era of decline of agriculture and farming and the ever increasing emphasis on technology and conveniences, the Lancaster Fair has tried to adapt by adding new features such as wireless internet access, computer technologies, and has a full service campground for our fairgoers.

The Lancaster Fair has spanned three centuries by adapting and providing great attractions and entertainment...May it be around for many more....

