

# The Rush County Fair

By John D. Wilson  
Rush County Historian

This is the fourteenth article commemorating the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022. It will present a historical summary of the Rush County Fair. The 2021 Rush County Fair runs from June 26<sup>th</sup> through July 3<sup>rd</sup>. Burton Brothers Amusements will provide the midway rides and games.

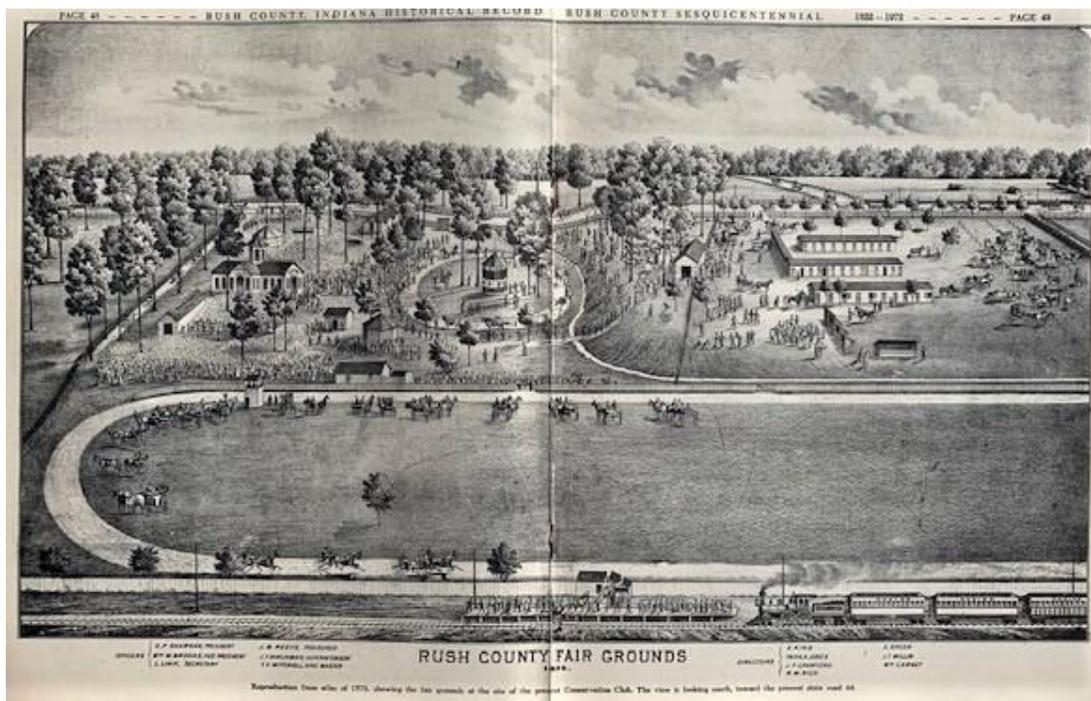
Rush County's Fair has been located in six different locations over the years. In 1851 there was a fair located near where the Lower Cemetery is on South Jackson Street in Rushville. The site wasn't large enough for horse racing but there was judging of horses and cattle. Pierce Griffin from near Mauzy brought in a live buffalo for display.

The second location for the county fair was near the old B and O Railroad Depot and the Havens School in Rushville.

By 1852 a Rush County Agricultural Association was formed, and on May 23, 1856, they purchased eleven acres of land from Joseph Lakin two miles east of Rushville on State Road 44 (where the Conservation Club and skeet shooting range are today.) The first fair was held there in 1857. It originally had a 1/3 mile track for harness racing which was later increased to a 1/2 mile track.

Also in 1857 the Agricultural Society reorganized financially. They formed a joint-stock company with capital stock of \$1,200 to be divided into shares of \$10 each and distributed equally among Rush County townships. Their constitution stated, "We the undersigned citizens of Rush County and State of Indiana, are desirous of promoting the prosperity of agricultural and mechanical pursuits". Total premiums paid out were not to be less than \$600, and stockholders in the fair were granted free admission.

John Megee was elected President of the Agricultural Society, and Stephen Donaldson was Secretary. Daniel Wilson was elected General Superintendent, and Thomas V. Mitchell was Marshall of the stockring. The natural outdoor stockring is still evident today just east of the Conservation Building. The dates for the 1857 fair were September 16<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup>. By 1879 the fairgrounds had increased their holdings to 26 acres and 133 rods.



Historian John Arnold wrote in his county history regarding the fair.... "It is a general purpose Fair, where there is something to interest and amuse everybody." "Though comparisons are said to be odious, I cannot refrain from contrasting the management of it with that of Fayette County. The fast horsemen and sportsmen got control of things there, and it soon degenerated into mere races when gambling, drunkenness, and all kindred vices became so rampant that the farmers ceased to attend or allow their families to be exposed to its contaminating influence." Obviously Rush County didn't follow that route. It had a blend of agricultural and domestic exhibits, and horse racing.

During the heyday at the Road 44 Fairgrounds, the CH and D Railroad ran a shuttle to the fair. Later Indianapolis and Cincinnati Traction Co. also ran interurban cars to the event. Rushville businesses closed on Thursday so their employees could attend, and the Post Office even maintained a branch on the grounds.

But all good things come to an end. By 1917 WWI was a high priority. There was a pandemic flu virus. The fair could no longer show a profit. The fairgrounds and buildings were sold at a sheriff's sale.

Rush County went a decade without a county fair. Finally in 1927 a county fair was held at Rushville's Memorial Park.

From 1931-1934, 4-H Club exhibits were on display at the courthouse and on the city streets. Then in 1935 the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a horse show and other open livestock contests at Memorial Park. A carnival, concessions, and implement exhibits were added in 1939.

By 1940 a benevolent gift of 18.6 acres of land adjacent to Memorial Park was presented to the Rush County Agricultural Association by Ora and Dessie Lower of Homer. In 1942 two livestock buildings were erected. A tent between the two was used as a showing until a building connecting the two was built in 1950. The Lower gift and other accomplishments came at a time when the U.S. was engaged in WWII.

So for the last 81 years Rush County has held a fair at their current location. Over that period there has been a mutual working relationship between the fair, the city park system, and the high school. For many years the fair used Memorial Gym for 4-H and adult exhibits. The basketball goals were raised and canvas tarps protected the floor. The old Multipurpose Room at the Rushville Consolidated High School (RCHS) and then RCHS Laughlin Center were used for special fair events and exhibitions. The Queen Contest, Fashion Show, and Baby Show were some of the featured events. The fair also used RCHS parking lots adjacent to the fairground.

Other buildings were added.... the Community Building made of McCorkle Stone was used for business displays, the race track for midget racing, horse pulls, tractor pulls, and demolition derby, and the Root Building built in 1986 for exhibits formerly displayed at Memorial Gym.

A mainstay of the fair has been the food concession tent on the east side of the Community Building operated by the New Salem Lions Club. Inside the Community Building there are booths for the Republicans and Democrats, the Rush County Historical Society, Rush County Schools, Rush County Foundation, Rush County Farm Bureau, and a host of other businesses and organizations.

There have been a couple of problems for the fair board over the years. One is the fact the fairgrounds is landlocked. There is not much room for expansion. There are only two livestock barns and the show arena, so livestock is moved in and out for single day judging. There has been a separate day for poultry and rabbits, sheep and goats, swine, dairy cattle, and beef cattle. This may be a blessing; however, as during the heat it's probably better for the animals and exhibitors not to have to stay for multiple days. The 4-H horse and pony members have their show at the old fairgrounds on State Road 44. A few years ago six more acres were added to the 18.6 Lower gift, but the new land is used primarily as a staging area for the midget races.

Another concern is that the fair dates are at the mercy of the amusement company and when the company has available dates. The fair board always tries to get the best possible amusement company since the midway is usually their biggest draw. Invariably it rains “cats and dogs” a couple of days during the fair. Sometimes the midway becomes the “mudway” and multiple bales of hay are hauled in.

Really the biggest attraction of fair week is seeing old friends and catching up on the latest news. This year we will have two year’s worth of news to catch up on.

One byproduct of the fair is that 4-H members have the opportunity to auction their livestock on a designated evening. Rush County businesses have overwhelmingly supported these auctions over the years.

Another byproduct of the fair has been the large number of exhibitors and leaders that participate at the Indiana State Fair. In more recent years people like Bob White, Roger Hale, Neil Kuhn, Lynn Kuhn, Phil Dalrymple and many others have provided help and leadership for one of the nation’s best state fairs.

Please indulge a personal experience I had at the Rush County Fair. Having been a 10-year 4-H member, I encouraged my daughter Carrie and my son Andy to be in 4-H. On one occasion my son was showing rabbits. The judge called for the junior doe group. Being a helpful parent, I opened a cage and pulled out what I was sure to be the champion junior doe and handed “her” to Andy. He took the rabbit to the judge’s table and, after looking the animal over thoroughly, the judge announced, “This rabbit is disqualified. It should be in the junior buck class.” The look on my son’s face was memorable. Obviously I had chosen the wrong cage. I tried not to be so helpful after that!

During the off season fairground facilities have been utilized for a variety of events.... football practice, football game parking, cross country meets, indoor track and baseball practice, circuses, and midget races. At the Community Building there have been auctions, election polls, and exhibitions, and at the Root Building weddings and Farm Bureau meetings.

Our current and past fair boards are to be commended for their hard work and dedication. They have provided a great service to the county and their efforts are really appreciated. This year’s officers are: President; John Meyer, Vice President; Eric Pike, Secretary; Karen Macy, and Treasurer; Ron Westerfeld.

Another fair of note in Rush County was the Manilla World’s Fair. From the 1880’s until the 1890’s the Manilla Fair exhibited farm products and contested horse racing. The grounds were located on the north bank of Little Blue River, half a mile south of the Little Blue River Quaker Church and two miles north of Manilla. When the fair no longer existed the Octagonal Exposition Building was moved to a farm on the Posey-Walker Township line. It was preserved and still stands.

Sources for this month’s article were: History Of Rush County, Indiana 1888, Rush County Sesquicentennial History 1972, Rush County Interim Report, and the 2021 Rush County Fair Schedule. A special thank you to Susan Tebbe (Rush County Extension Office), John Meyer, Charlie Smith, Steve Johnson, and Jerry Swisher.