

THE WEBSTER COUNTY FAIR AT BLADEN, NE OVER 100 YEARS OF MEMORIES, FAMILY, FOOD & FUN!

2006 marked the 100th anniversary of the Webster County Fair at Bladen, Nebraska. While that is a remarkable feat for the residents of the Bladen community there is some background that is interesting from a historical standpoint. The history of the fair goes back much further than 1906 which marked the beginning of the fair in Bladen, Nebraska.

According to Webster County historical records, the original “Webster County Agricultural Society was organized in September, 1873, and on the 22nd and 23rd of October the first county fair was held. The fair was a complete success. There was a grand display of all kinds of farm products, which compared favorably in quality and in the yield with any part of the State. On the first organization of the society A. M. Talbott was President, and James Le Duc, Vice President.”

In 1876 the county fair continued to increase in population and improvements. “Several Webster County farmers took their agricultural commodities and some livestock via train on to Lincoln and the Nebraska State Fair later that fall, and those Webster County products were awarded a medal.”

The Ag Society continued their involvement with showcasing the livestock and produce of Webster County and added horse racing which came to be a popular event. They then started bringing in rides and other entertainments. The Red Cloud Chief on September 25, 1891 reported: “The Webster county fair promises to be the best ever held in Webster county. President Alyea, informs us that the prospect is good for a rousing good time. Every indication points to a large display of home grown products, while the stock department it is said will be replete with many fine herds. The speed program will be worth your time to come and see. Do your level best and show your loyalty to your county, by supporting and aiding the fair.”

The history of Webster County does not seem to explain, and it is not clear what happened during the next 10 years, when for some reason it was decided to disband this “county fair” and Webster County Ag Society at Red Cloud. There does seem however to be some explanation for the decline of the original county fair at Red Cloud.

It was common practice by the turn of the 19th century for each community to have celebrations, many of which were in the fall including baseball games, horse racing and other activities. Some suggest that the Red Cloud event was just that, a community celebration and not a county wide celebration at all. With the upcoming advantage of better transportation by the early 1900’s there was an interest that grew within the county for a county-wide agricultural fair. Several towns in the county vied to host the event. According to one document it came down to Red Cloud (the county seat) in the southern end of the county and Bladen in the northern part of the county. Bladen won. Some say the reason was that “Red Cloud’s train depot was too far from their downtown area for people to walk easily to the fair.” Others say that “a contingent of “very pious” people in Red Cloud did not want the horse racing that had been a part of the Ag Society, and were afraid of the “evils” that seemed to come with that – “gambling, liquor and wicked women”.

What ever the reason, the Webster County Fair Association was formed in 1906 and 57 shareholders bought a piece of ground on the western edge of Bladen from the Spence family. The officers in charge of the first fair were Bill Wegmann, Joe Denton, A.E. Cox, A.R. Rudd and the Fair managers were Sam Hogate and C. H. Hasebrook.

The association in its first year put up a large grandstand, organized games and spent \$500 on a horse race track (Bladen boasted one of the finest half-mile race tracks in the state when harness racing was popular), they also put down a well for \$100, bought baseball uniforms for \$50, and awarded nearly \$500 in premiums for livestock and produce exhibits. The Webster County Fair has been at Bladen every year since 1905, when that group of eager young businessmen gave it a home.

Music was always a part of the fair with marching and concert bands performing from the immediate area and surrounding towns. There was a circular bandstand that became an important meeting place. Dances were held every night of the fair. Music is still a big part of the fair with featured singers and the sounds of a dance band on the last two nights of the fair permeates the air as people relax and unwind.

An important part of the fair was speakers on issues of the day. Groups and political pundits were given free use of the amphitheater for speeches. Williams Jennings Bryant spoke at the 1912 Webster County Fair. We don't see that kind of stumping anymore, but there still is plenty of issues and politics discussed and you will always find a politician or representative shaking hands, manning a booth at the fair or interviewing the shy young future exhibitors at the Rainbow Classic.

The Burlington Northern train ran special train routes into Bladen every morning of the fair bringing people to Bladen from Guide Rock, Red Cloud, Cowles, Blue Hill and other community towns and then returned them home in the evening. Those trains have been replaced by cars, campers and a plethora of pickups and trucks.

Shooting matches were one of the popular events and one of the active members of this activity was Willa Cather's uncle, George (G.P.) Cather. Horse races, however, was the big event of the fair, drawing hundreds of fans and spectators. Sulky races were the preferred form of horse race and drew the best horses from around the country. These were later replaced with trotters and pacers. There was not organized betting, but it was well known that people made private wagers on the outcomes of each race, especially when local favorites were involved.

There were also chariot races with mule teams instead of horses, running races in flour sacks, men racing against horses, Model T Ford races with the transmissions in reverse, pig racing, and many other events that were both novel and entertaining. The remains of the half mile track can still be seen from aerial views of the fairgrounds. Horses are still an important part of the fair and are judged along with the skills of the 4-H and FFA youth who exhibit them in the Working Ranch Horse Competition and the 4-H and FFA Horse Show during the first two days of the fair.

Barns held some of the county's finest poultry, sheep, dairy cattle, hogs, cattle and draft horses. Exhibit halls contained samples of the food, produce and craftsmanship of the citizens of Webster County. Those barns still hold examples of the best in the country. Webster County is and has always been known for the quality of its animals and pride of their owners.

The quality of Webster County livestock, and in particular the beef exhibits, is well known across the state and is something that judges brag about at other fairs across the state. Many judges leave saying that this is to them a "Mini-State Fair". The tradition continues today with good numbers and the high quality that has been synonymous with the Webster County Fair.

Horse racing at the Fair ended in the late 1920's and the replacement for this entertainment was the Webster County Rodeo which got its debut in 1933 using local stock from the old Thorne Ranch. In 1948 the Webster County Fair Association built a new \$8,000 grandstand big enough to hold at least a thousand spectators.

The rodeo featured many of the best riders, ropers and steer wrestlers in the country including many local participants. It ran for three nights just as it still does today. The Webster County Rodeo has always been a staple of the Fair and provides three nights of entertainment for the fairgoers, a time-tried tradition that continues through today.

With the Webster County Fair located in Bladen, 4-H clubs have always been strong in the county and continue their mark of excellence each year. Webster County's first Baby Beef Club was organized in Bladen in 1919 and included Floyd McMahon, Eldon Lewis and Desco Lovejoy. It was the second one in the nation to be formed. There are today thirteen 4-H clubs, two shooting sports clubs (the shooting expertise and tradition continues) and four FFA chapters that service the youth in the county and are all part of the Webster County Fair.

Extension clubs were organized in the early 1940's to educate farm women and enhance rural living. The offshoot of these clubs was involvement in the home economics side of the county fair, and is still an important part of the fair today. Static exhibits like clothing, foods, garden produce, crafts and arts are still judged and viewed by the citizens during the fair.

Facilities have come and gone, storms and tornados have played a part in the history of the buildings at the fair. The large grandstand was demolished by a tornado in the late 1950's and replaced with the current rodeo arena. The fairgrounds experienced another tornado in 2004 that demolished a couple of buildings and the old wooden rodeo grounds fence which is now replaced by a new chain link fence. There has been continual update and construction of exhibit halls, show arenas, open air auditorium and animal buildings over the years. The Webster County Fair at Bladen, Nebraska continues to be one of the nicest facilities and largest and finest livestock fairs in Nebraska.

The Webster County Fair Demolition Derby has been a more recent but still an important entertainment for the fair and continues to be a big attraction for fair-goers and helps make Saturday the biggest day of the fair. The afternoon of squealing tires, racing engines and the sound of tearing steel, banging bumpers and the cheers of the crowd is a great warm-up for the finale of the rodeo that follows the demolition derby.

A Webster County Youth Livestock Foundation was set up in 2001 to help the 4-H and FFA youth with additional purses for the breeding livestock portion of the fair. A special Foundation event is held each year during the fair to generate funds for the foundation. It is proof of the commitment of Webster County to the youth, the fair and the quality of exhibits that come to the fair each year.

Many activities and even livestock classes have been added over the years including: a Round Robin Showmanship event, Team Beef Fitting, Ice Cream Rolls, Dog Agility Competition and more recently Meat Goat classes and a Working Ranch Horse Competition. The Webster County Fair, like everything else, evolves continually, fitting the environment of the times.

One cannot forget the food and fun. Food booths provided by local churches and 4-H clubs and even vendors that come for the fair add that intangible part of the fair that makes for memories for the future. The aroma coming from these food stands mixed with the lights and sounds of the Carnival all add to make the Webster County Fair an experience and a part of rural life that is still enjoyed in our little portion of the world.

Webster County Fair:

On it's second Hundred Years of Making Memories for Family, Friends, Food and Fun!