

Phillips County Fair evolves with the times for over a century

Written by Jes-c Brandt



Even in the early years of the Phillips County Fair, organizers would strive to provide entertainment for everyone. In the 20s and 30s aerial performances were quite popular. In the 1923 Fair in particular, crowds were awed by acrobats performing on the wings and wheels of the plane. A wedding performed in the air was also a favorite that year.

The Phillips County Fair is a tradition nearly as old as the county itself. For over 100 years residents and visitors alike have flocked to the fairgrounds to enter exhibits, enjoy the entertainment and generally have a good time with fellow fairgoers.

Now many seasoned fair participants would say they know what to expect from the Phillips County Fair, as the lineup has many consistent attractions. However, this hasn't always been the case. With all the changes the 20th century has brought about, the fair has continually evolved to keep up with the times.

In the early years after the county was incorporated, it is clear that a fair was something the citizens felt would be an asset to the community. As early as 1891, the fair was being formed, with the focus on the exhibits. Of particular note were huge turnips and beets, art, cooking, sewing and flower exhibits. The county purchased buildings to accommodate the event, but despite the apparent interest in holding an annual fair, it had a rough start.

Some years a fair was held, but others it didn't get put together. Due to the inconsistent nature of the early fairs, many meetings were held to decide if the fair would be continued or not.

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Around the year 1916 the tradition of the Phillips County Fair started to move in an upward direction. The Phillips County Agriculture and Livestock Association conducted two fairs before turning over the responsibility to the County Commissioners. With the transfer, the Ag and Livestock Association contributed \$1,100 in surplus cash and \$1,500 in equipment, including grandstand seating, electric light globes and wire.

At that time, the county commissioners bought a 40 acre tract for the fairgrounds from Fred Borland. The land, half a mile east of Holyoke's Main Square, sold for \$150 an acre.

From there the county fair quickly transformed into an extraordinary event. Officers were elected, grandstands and a racehorse barn were built, and organizers went all out planning fairs that would provide entertainment for everyone.



☐☐ Horses were a popular attraction from the beginning of the Phillips County Fair, with races drawing contestants and spectators from near and far. At the 1928 Fair, trained horses were included in the scheduled entertainment.

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The fair of 1923 was truly one for the history books. Touting the slogan 'make fair-time your vacation time,' the fair was heavily advertised. Newspaper ads called it the "greatest county fair" and a booster trip was scheduled to spread the word to neighboring towns. Ten cars carrying the Holyoke band, Judge Weir and a number of boosters traveled to a dozen Colorado and Nebraska communities, where they promoted the Phillips County Fair. The booster trip was a promotional tactic that was used for decades.

When the '23 Fair came around, it was everything they hoped it to be. Most of the businesses in town closed at noon on fair days, and practically the whole county turned out for the event.

On the first day alone, 1,015 season tickets were sold for the price of \$2 for adults and \$1 for children. That is up from only 560 the previous year. Between single admission and season tickets, an estimated 3,000 people were in attendance daily.

The first day of the fair was "Kids Day," and all the kids got in free. A number of kids races were held, not unlike the present day fairs. Some of the more unusual contests included catching a greased pig and climbing a greased pole. Some races had prizes up to \$5 for the winner.

On the kids day, the entertainment was targeted at the younger audience. Music, comedians and magicians all had shows for the youth.

Horse racing proved to be a big hit at the fair. Over 100 horses were present for the meet, with approximately 3/4 of the horses coming from outside the county. In addition to traditional saddle horse races, competitors also competed in a chariot race for a \$60 purse.

When the grandstands weren't packed for races, the crowds gathered to see amazing aerial performances. Acrobats did tricks on the wings and wheels of the plane and did parachute drops to the ground. When stunts were not being performed, fairgoers even had the opportunity to go for a ride.

Judge Weir performed a wedding between Lyle S. Dady and Mildred Cummings in the plane. It was said Weir's booming voice was the only one powerful enough to be heard over the roar of

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the motor.

At night the pilot did illuminated flights that could be seen for miles.

Throughout the duration of the fair, the brightly lit midway offered fun for all, with a Ferris wheel, merry-go-round and an aeroplane swing. Every night there were both pavilion and indoor dances. An old-time dance at the courthouse was just one more way the fair catered to as broad an audience as possible.

At the conclusion of the 1923 Phillips County Fair, they called it the greatest fair in history. Since that time, Phillips County has organized countless memorable fairs.

In 1928 “Aviator” the famous jumping horse, along with 10 other trained horses, was there for the county’s entertainment. Five girl jockeys rode the horses, taking them over hurdles in thrilling races. For a dime, anyone could go for a ride on Aviator.



□□ As the world changed over the years, the Phillips County Fair saw changes of its own. Where horses and airplanes once provided the big entertainment, the automobile eventually took their place. In this 1963 Fair, the grandstands were filled with people who wanted to see the tricks the drivers had to offer. To this day, cars are a big hit at the Fair, with stock car races consistently on the line up.

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With the rise of the automobile, auto races soon found their way onto the fair schedule. Since the first races in 1924, cars have continued to draw a crowd during the Fair.

Another event that has become a fair tradition is the rodeo. The first rodeo was held in 1941. Some years the rodeo is the main attraction. In 1963 there were 16 steer wrestlers, 15 ropers, 13 bareback riders, 12 saddle bronc riders and 10 bull riders featured. A number of nationally ranked cowboys were included.

At that same fair, Miss Rodeo America made an appearance, and trick riding, roping, barrel racing and quarter horse cutting were popular attractions.

In addition to such events as the rodeo and stock car races, many current fair events have long histories at the Phillips County Fair. The parade has been around at least since 1919, and local organizations have always contributed to the effort with floats, cars and other entries.

Talent shows featuring local performers and concerts by outside artists have been a part of the fair since even the earliest years. The once popular vaudeville programs have since been replaced with the likes of Cowboy Capital Chorus and other such entertainment, but the entertainment remains key.

Now an obsolete tradition, the old fairs used to have one day dedicated as a "Haxtun Day," where citizens of the neighboring town in the county would make a special effort to attend the fair as representatives of their community.

A number of fair events have become yearly practices, but there have been some that only a lucky few were able to experience, such as Kongo a live gorilla, performing midgets and a magician sawing a woman in half. A 14 act circus in the grandstands was once included, and the "Wheat Queen" pageant was short lived.

At the tail-end of WWII, Phillips County Fair felt the effects of the war alongside the rest of the country. At the 1945 fair, a special display of war souvenirs was featured. Local men and women with a connection to the war were invited to contribute items. It was also noted that

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“money is of no hindrance this year,” as it had been in years past. As a result, that year’s fair had more events and more people getting out and enjoying them.

Of course, at the heart of the fair are the exhibits. While other aspects of the fair have come and gone, the exhibits are a guarantee. In the 20s the fair was praised for having some of the highest premiums in the state. Phillips County awarded \$1 for first place and \$.75 for second, while several other county fairs’ premiums were \$.75 and \$.35 respectively.

The county as a whole seems to have always seen the value of holding the fair, as is evidenced by its large place in the county’s history. A 1930 editorial in the Enterprise said the following about the tentative decision to not hold a fair.

“If a fair is not to be held this year and can be replaced by other celebrations of one kind or another, all is well and good... Yet when it is all said and done, we are very doubtful if anything can be invented in Holyoke that will take its place as far as a drawing card for the town is concerned, and we feel certain nothing will take its place as an educational institution for the entire county.”

For a long time now the people of Holyoke have rallied to keep the fair a part of the town’s yearly activities, not merely as a static event, but as a dynamic and evolutionary function, providing fun for all.