

THE WILLIAMSTOWN FAIR

by Ruth D. Mowat

It was but a few years after the pioneer settlers of the St. Lawrence Valley first broke the soil of the Province that agricultural societies came into being for the purpose of encouraging interest in, promoting improvements in, and advancing the standards of agriculture. So prevalent were these societies that the provincial government passed an act in 1825 to allow one hundred English pounds be given to each group to encourage farming.

The improvement of stock was of prime importance, as one can see by perusing the old "Fair Programmes" where many prizes were designated for bulls and stallions. Ploughing matches, Caledonian Games, domestic manufacture and implement manufacture were part of every early fair, and practically all early fairs ended with a horse race.

Another reason for the popularity of these societies was the fact that meetings were held at the local inns where a great repast was had, along with a good deal of liquid refreshment. This afforded much needed social intercourse for the settlers as they planned "The Fair".

The first provincial fair was held in Toronto in 1846, and in 1884 Ottawa presented "The Grand Dominion". Five thousand pounds were given by the federal government for this exhibition where Sir John A. MacDonald, Prime Minister of Canada stated, "It has been my happy lot to see the commencement of these gatherings for agriculture and art grow from a very small plant to a magnificent tree."



Long before "The Grand Dominion" was thought of, the gregarious folk of Glengarry gravitated regularly to a central spot to buy and sell, play, dance, and argue the merits of one breed over another. They came to Williamstown—"Mill Town" as it was known then because of Sir John Johnson's mills—and held their "fairs" in the streets of the village. In 1808, the Archives of the Dominion of Canada state that a patent was granted to hold a fair in this village and to establish a duly recognized authority to arrange and hold a fair in proper and acceptable manners. The fair was made the responsibility of the sheriff. This indicates that the fair was a going concern and perhaps needed the attention of peace officers to settle quarrels and other out-of-hand matters. In 1815, Sir John Johnson conveyed a parcel of land to the people of Williamstown for the sole purpose of holding a fair. This was the parcel of land which is still used today for the Williamstown Fair. It is a beautiful spot with pine trees towering over the grounds and a gully running through.

The Shadow of Tradition: A Tale of Old Glengarry by C. Holmes MacGillivray, contains a chapter whose setting is the Williamstown Fair circa 1809. It reads as follows:



They left their mounts and proceeded up the straggling village streets to the fair grounds. People had gathered from far and near. They had come to see what the neighbours of the district had to display and for the joy of meeting old friends and joining in a round of amusement. At one side of the large field, the cattle were tethered. The horses were tied to a rail fence that enclosed the grounds. The sheep and pigs were cooped in small log pens close by. Booths of unplanned boards held a variety of homemade blankets, homespun tweed, rag carpet and all sorts of knitting and needlework. There were special platforms for dance competitions, and large structures where, for sixpence a couple, the lads and lasses tripped through the mazes of Highland measures, with a serious mein that would be better suited to a more solemn occasion. But they enjoyed themselves, and so did the large audiences gathered to watch. Pipers in the full glory of the kilt, their pipes bedecked with streaming ribbons strutted through the crowds, awaiting the time to match their skills, while the young men proved their strength with the heavy weights that would be used in the Highland games later in the day."

Many changes have taken place since the horses were tied at the Inn and the folks walked to the old fair grounds. An agricultural hall was built in the early 1900's, four new cattle barns were erected in 1973, new fencing has been done and modern sanitation buildings built. The grounds have been tile drained and levelled.

The community, as we see, has always played a very important role in the fall fair. As organizations emerged, they became part of the annual event. The Ladies Groups, Girl Guides, 4-H groups, Social Clubs, S.P.C.A. and Nursery School all participate. In the early 1900's, the fall fairs all held a special fair for the school children. Seed s and eggs were provided for the students in order that they might grow their own gardens and hatch the eggs. They had to sew and care for the crop and show at the fair, according to the directions given for each class. Other items of interest made by the students and shown in various classes were a model of a farm gate, a bird house for purple martins, a milking stool, four blocks of a hand-sewn quilt, a clothes pin bag, apple pies, and bacon hogs, calves and ponies. In one prize list a Waterman fountain pen was donated and was to be given to the teacher

whose school won the most points. Sports feats, public speaking, singing and penmanship were also on the agenda. In 1944 the school fairs were amalgamated with the regular exhibition, and have remained so to this day, with a trophy for the school with the most exhibit points.

On many occasions, notable men and women have given of their time to participate in the opening ceremonies of the Williamstown Fair. Among these are the Right Honourable MacKenzie King, Canada's Prime Minister in 1945; Dr. Charlotte Whitton, Ottawa Mayor; Gordon Green, writer; Fern Guindon, M.P.P.; Ed Lumley, M.P. for Cornwall; Laurier Lapierre, and dignitaries from both the provincial and federal Departments of Agriculture.

Along with the serious side of the fairs, the judging and other competitions, the societies tried to provide entertainment in a more fanciful vein. In the early years pipers provided the music, locals displayed their dancing talents and children performed with singing, spelling bees, and recitations. Tug-of-War was a popular form of entertainment as were horse pulling contests and old-time fiddlers' performances. More recent entertainment has included music by the Family Brown, local dancers, a Bavarian band and amateur talent contests. Today we have a children's parade, pet show, mutt show, baby contest, horse show, and a rather large midway.

As one peruses the old prize lists, one can see a definite trend in today's society to "go back" to the olden days. Many of the arts and crafts of our forefathers have been revived, if not for the monetary benefits, for the relaxation of the hobby.

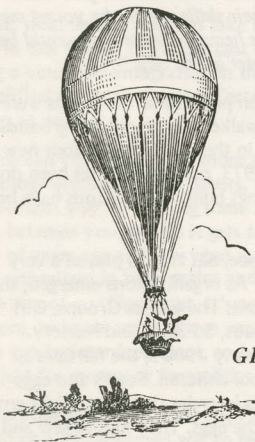
The old prize lists reflected the trades of the time. The 1907 list contains advertising from a blacksmith, a bakery, a tailor, many general stores and an "up-to-date soda fountain." The modern day prize list tries to provide classes for everyone, of every talent and interest. The urban exhibitor is encouraged to compete with his rural neighbours, whether it is with lacy tablecloths, carrots, or animals.

The Williamstown Fair has survived wars, the Great Depression, and other setbacks. However, a dedicated group of directors has met each year to overcome all obstacles and present an exhibition. Williamstown Fair is one of the oldest institutions in our relatively new country. By keeping up with modern times and serving the agricultural community where in it had its beginnings, it has remained sound and healthy. Long may it continue to flourish.

From All's Fair—The Story of Williamstown Fair and Williamstown, Its Home by Ruth D. Mowat

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