

This Week in Saratoga County History

Saratoga County Fair – Tumultuous Two Years

Submitted by Sarah Welch June 29, 2022

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Saratoga County Fair Grandstand

In the summer of 2020, I recounted the early history of the Saratoga County Fair in a previous article. Much has changed in the last two years, so I thought I would update the story.

2020 was an unusual year for the Saratoga County Fair and the world. Due to the virus that has invaded the United States and the rest of the world, we had to enact many changes so that we could continue to exist. When things began to be closed or canceled by Governor Cuomo, the Board of Directors unanimously voted to cancel the fair. Most of the other activities were also cancelled. We opened the grounds to some of our food vendors. People were able to come on the grounds at no entrance fee and buy fair food that seemed to be missed by many people.

Another important event in 2020 was the fate of grandstand which was in poor condition. After many suggestions on how to treat the problem, the Board voted unanimously to have the grandstand demolished. It had been built in 1896 at a cost of \$4000 and had a dirt floor until 1977. In that year a concrete floor was poured and petitions built to divide the area to be used

for the 4H food stand and other display areas. In the late 1990's the education department under the direction of Susan Leahey was located under the grandstand. In the early 2000's, the front wall of the foundation of the grandstand was replaced.

It was discovered during a building inspection that the wall had collapsed in some areas and a new wall was necessary to support the grandstand and make it safe for occupancy. In 2019 it was confirmed that the grandstand was contaminated with lead paint on the siding and asbestos in the roof area and was declared to be unfit for occupancy.

We had many estimates on how to repair the building. We would have had to remove the lead and asbestos and to bring it up to code including handicap accessibility. It was determined due to the high cost to renovate the 125-year-old structure the only feasible solution was to demolish it.

In November the grandstand was taken down by Greenbriar owned by Griffin Gillette who was also a vendor for the fair. It took several days to prepare the area to contain the asbestos. When one support wall was taken down the grandstand collapsed upon itself and caved in. The total demolition and removal were accomplished in two weeks at a cost exceeding \$50,000 that included a \$2000 fee paid to NYS for proper asbestos removal. Several members of the Board of Directors, Susan Rhoades Executive Director and a few of the neighbors gathered on the fairgrounds to watch the operation.

In November Mike Smith, Supervisor from the town of Galway was instrumental in getting approval for the Saratoga County Board of Supervisors to include a grant of \$250,000 in the 2021 budget to help with the cost of replacing the grandstand. To be eligible to receive this grant, the fair had to match the grant with \$250,000 from donations, to replace the grandstand.

Our next project was to raise this money through donations. At a Board meeting in December, it was determined to replace the grandstand and a plan was developed to secure the needed donations.

In 2020 the fair lost several of its many faithful people instrumental in the success of our past fairs. Dorothy Rowland from the culinary department, Jim Coleman from the grounds crew and bottle collector for over thirty years and Richie Pine that ran the shop of the antique building for 20 years, Tony Eastwood active in the conservation department and Tim Barnes that took care of all the flower beds on the grounds are a few of the people we lost that year.

In April 2021 the Board of Directors voted unanimously not to have a full six day fair due to lack of finances and regulations that would have to be followed giving the ongoing pandemic. Instead, the Board planned a three-day event including, horses, cattle and other animals, some food vendors and tractor and lawn mower pulls.

A fund-raising program was developed with the first event held in May. Each of the 21 directors was asked to get 21 people to donate \$21 to get the directors released from quarantine on the fair grounds. All directors participated and we exceeded our original goal.

We held several other fund raisers during 2021 such as barbeque chicken drive thru events, a pancake breakfast, car show, a fair food event in which local concessions sold their products, raffles of baskets donated by departments of the fair and other events. As of October 1, we had raised the \$250,000 needed to match the Saratoga County Donations.

On a sad note, in December of 2021 we lost three long time volunteers with the fair. Marie Willard had been an employee of the fair for several years in the late 1990's and was a member of the Board from 1981 to 1995. Jeffrey W. Fitzsimmons was a volunteer at the fair for several years where he operated the wobble wheel roller for the truck and tractor pulls. Frank Griffin was a board member from 1993 to his retirement on September 30, 2021. He attended annual conferences in Las Vegas and Fair management and networking across New York State with State Association.

The Agricultural Society is looking forward to 2022. Work continues to replace the grandstand. The actual project started in March by adding the necessary fill to level the area to the level of the track to a depth of approximately 18". The concrete base for the bleachers would be poured in May by the Amish and the bleachers would be set in June. The cover for the bleachers would be phase 3 at a later date. We look forward to returning to normalcy this year when the fair will be held for six days from July 19-24. The Saratoga County Fair will carry on.