

The Jackson County Fair **By Dennis Powers**

State and county fairs began nationally in the early- to mid-1800s to allow rural families to share their experiences, including exhibiting the best agricultural practices, seeds and crops, livestock, and equipment. The first state fair took place in 1841 on the populated east coast at Syracuse, New York. All of the states in the Union followed and began funding their own local fairs.

These events were not only where farmers and ranchers met to talk and show “shop,” but also where everyone could see the latest inventions, whether these were electric lights, generators, radios, televisions, or even washing machines. Presently, these fairs-- including Jackson County’s--have arcade games, petting zoos, amusement centers, well-known singers, concerts, entertainment, and much more in addition to the traditional 4-H and FFA (“Future Farmers of America”) exhibits.

The first Jackson County Fair was named the “Agricultural Show” and held in October 1859 in Jacksonville, which was the same year that Oregon became a state. The Jackson County Fair Association was organized in 1872, celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2009, and is the longest running county fair in Oregon.

For the 2009 celebration, this county fair showcased the changes in technology, such as a rotary-TV set placed next to a plasma flat screen, a rotary-dial phone against an iPhone, and vehicles exhibited from every decade of the Twentieth Century. The contrast with the first show in 1859 would have been striking, as that fair more than likely relied on baked goods, canned goods, and some livestock.

The first fairgrounds were located on south Oakdale in Medford. With complaints from the city and county due to running its automobile races (which jeopardized the adjacent airfield) and needing a better location, the Fair moved in 1922 to where the Medford Armory is presently. It changed later to the present 200-acre location at the Expo in Central Point.

Country fairs were quite important in the days before television, theme parks, and the Internet. With races being held then on everything from autos and airplanes to horses, the 1920s before the Great Depression were the Fair’s heydays--and the place to be seen by the well-dressed during the “Roaring Twenties.” Well-known drivers raced Duesenbergs, Millers, and overhead-valve Fords with special license plates in promotion. The famous Barney Oldfield even came to the Jackson County Fair to wave the checkered flag in one year.

Commercial development along I-5 into the early 1970s began to infringe on the Fair’s need to expand, especially for rodeo, equestrian, and show-horse events. Jackson County sold the property in 1974 and moved to its current location. In 1998, the Red and Eleanor Isola Memorial Fund donated \$700,000 to build the present 37,000 square-foot equestrian

arena. With a 1,500 seating capacity, the Isola Memorial Arena and facility became the second-largest covered arena in the West next to one in Reno, Nevada.

Held in mid-July, the Jackson County Fair puts on numerous events and going-ons. Some 85,000 people attended the six-day fair in 2012; and the events included attractions from livestock judging to beer gardens, from Go-Kart races to steak suppers, and sprint car races to top entertainment. In 2013, the attractions included a “pirate parrot” show, a strolling robot, camel rides, hypnotist shows, sheep riding, motorcross racing, and a monster-truck show, in addition to the rodeo, bull-riding, and other traditional events.

There is competition to Jackson County’s Fair, as nearly every county in Oregon holds one starting in July and heading into September. For example, the Siskiyou and Josephine County Fairs are held in August, and the Oregon State Fair starts in late-August. In 2013, attendance at Jackson County’s was slightly down to 78,000 attendees. However, this granddaddy of Oregon fairs has more than held its own over the years--and has certainly changed with the times.

Sources: Jackson County Fair: Facts and History,” at [Background on State Fairs](#); Ron Brown, “KRDV: Oregon Trails: Jackson County Fair,” July 13, 2012, at [History of Jackson County’s Fair](#); Alberto Enriquez, “Family donates arena,” *Mail Tribune*, July 9, 1998, at [Large Donation for Arena](#); “Expo/Fairgrounds: The Jackson County Fair” at [2013 Attractions](#).