

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

BOISE AGRICULTURAL FAIRS
(Advertiser Column By Judith Austin)

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The Western Idaho Fair, one of the most interesting events in the Boise area, has just closed its gates for this year [September 7, 1970]. The fairgrounds are new, the racetrack newer still, but they and their predecessors have a lengthy history.

The earliest calls for an "agricultural fair" in Boise came in 1868, and in the next year the legislature appropriated \$1,000 to help build the necessary structures for such an exposition. Unfortunately, the funds went unspent, considerably to the disgust of the city's leading newspaper editor.

Finally, in 1872, leading citizens of Boise became sufficiently well organized to put on the first agricultural fair in the territory. Their effort met with limited success, judging both by newspaper stories [which emphasized the horse racing which went on at the same time rather more than the fair activities themselves] and the fact that there were no fairs from the late 1870's until 1897.

In that year, however, the new generation of Boise businessmen decided that the time had come to organize a statewide fair which would serve as a huge advertisement for the advantages of the state. Businesses were encouraged in quite unsubtle fashion to pledge funds that would pay for new fair buildings and for various attractions. Life was somewhat simpler 73 years ago; it took only three months to put the whole program together.

The fair was originally planned to consist of "three days of

festivities and sports soon after the fall work is out of the way, when all the farmers of the country might attend"; the three days soon grew to five, and on the formal last day of the fair--October 16--it was decided that another day should be added. It really was statewide, and more: bands came not only from eastern Idaho but from Oregon and Utah as well, and the railroad--as eager to promote immigration to Idaho as were the businessmen--offered special rates from Salt Lake City as well as from various points around Idaho. Horses, for both exhibit and the ever popular races, were brought from the great Sparks Ranch in Nevada, and samples of crops and mining equipment and ore came from farms and mines all over Idaho.

The ultimate statewide feature of the fair was surely the contest for queen. The promoters announced in late August that for 10¢ a vote [the funds to go to pay for the fair] citizens might cast their ballots for the young lady who would reign over the state. Accounts of bloc voting and of "psycing out" rival cities made lively reading in the paper; the winner, in a landslide on the last day, was a 6-foot-tall blonde from Lewiston named Besie Vollmer. The queen contest apparently continued as a feature of the fair for several years. A photograph in the Idaho Historical Library's Collection shows Miss Minnie Finnegan, who ruled over the fair in 1899, with two maids of honor in the carriage that was to carry her in the magnificent opening parade.

Other pictures in the files suggest both the small size of the old fairgrounds and the standard activities that take place now as well. The first shows the carnival area, complete with barkers, exotic creatures, and a turn-of-the-century Ferris wheel. Another shows the grandstand and assembled spectators who have parked their vehicles on the infield to watch the races. The fairgrounds and the crowds were smaller at the turn of the century, but the spirit was as great as it is today.

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