



THE Allegany County FAIRGROUNDS YESTERDAY AND TODAY



Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

New Photography by: **Lance C. Bell, PPA**

There is nothing more American than the excitement of attending a fair. Happy children, 4-H exhibits, carnival rides, racing events, craft displays, entertainment, and special foods combine to make the annual fair an experience that never grows old. Hundreds of fairs are held throughout the country, drawing visitors to the traditional gatherings during the summer and autumn months. While fairs may vary in size and scope, and display a local flavor, having fun seems to be the one consistent rule that all such events uphold. Fortunately, Allegany County fairgoers have been an integral part of this All-American experience for generations.

The Allegany County Fairgrounds has hosted a variety of enjoyable events since 1924. The fairground's picturesque setting is framed above by sharply rising mountains and below by the Potomac River that quietly passes, almost unnoticed. One could not wish for a more beautiful venue. And yet, as the years have passed since the fairground was constructed, its own story has faded into the past even as the facility continues to serve the present day needs of residents.

Today's fairground was preceded in the 19th Century by many venues that served similar purposes. Carnivals, exhibitions, fairs, and sports programs would visit Cumberland and set up at the Stoney Battery grounds in North End, the N&G Tin Mill ball field in South

Cumberland, the present day Kensington-Algonquin site, the show grounds behind the Queen City Hotel, and at Johnson Heights. In the early 20th Century, Community Ballpark located along Wineow Street became a popular carnival grounds because of its proximity to major rail-road lines.

Horse racing tracks that are sometimes associated with county fairgrounds were also established in Cumberland. The first track opened in 1869 and was located between the north end of Virginia Avenue and Second Street in South Cumberland. Advertisements touted it as "the best half mile track in Maryland." An agricultural fair associated with the facility was organized in 1871 by the Agricultural and Mechanical Society of Allegany County, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. For reasons unknown today, that society disbanded but a least one noteworthy fair was later held at the race track under the auspices of the Agricultural and Mechanical Society of Western Maryland.

The most celebrated of the South Cumberland fairs was held in October, 1878. Unfortunately, rainy weather plagued the opening day. And if the weather wasn't enough of a problem, the celebrated author and lecturer, Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, guest of the fair, conducted himself in an "inexplicable" manner, and "was enough to try the patience of the average Fair Director." On a more positive note, President Rutherford B. Hayes attended the October event where he was supposed to "mix pumpkins and politics," according to a local newspaper report.

FIRST

1878



1878

ANNUAL FAIR

OF THE

AGRICULTURAL and MECHANICAL

SOCIETY OF WESTERN MARYLAND

Will be given at the City of

CUMBERLAND

TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, FRIDAY, OCT. 22-'3-4-5

LARGE PREMIUMS PAID

COMPETITION OPEN TO ALL!

THE CELEBRATED ORATOR, REV.

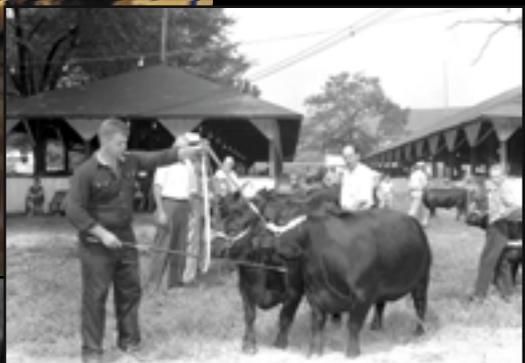
H. W. BEECHER

will deliver the address on

WEDNESDAY

HALF PAST ONE

LEO L. BATES, President. JOSEPH BILLEY, Vice President.



Premiums have always been a popular feature of the Allegany County Fair. Exhibitors proudly display their livestock and produce and are rewarded with ribbons and other prizes.

Opposite page, left: Jockeys tested the limits of their horses in the dash to the finish line in front of the grandstand. Right: Today's jockeys ride stock cars to thrill audiences.

...and they're off!



The arrival of President Hayes in Cumberland was cause for a parade and celebration. In addition to the president, Mrs. Hayes, Secretary of the Treasury, John Sherman, the Postmaster of Baltimore, and Maryland Governor John Carroll, arrived in Cumberland by train. Hundreds of visitors joined residents who swelled the total parade attendance to an estimated fifteen thousand. Following the parade, the president was introduced by Governor Carroll. President Hayes stated that he was familiar with the city and region and that he knew the significance of agriculture to the area. Other more typical events at that fair included four heats of harness racing, a blindfolded wheelbarrow race, and a greased pig chase.

By May, 1879, it was reported that horses from Baltimore, Winchester, Bedford, and Bel Air were preparing for the upcoming racing season at the South End track. And "Mr. Louis Peacock, in charge of the Fairgrounds, has been engaged all spring...and has placed the grounds in perfect order." The names Race Street and Grand Avenue are the only visible reminders of that particular fairground.

In 1894, horse racing and fair events moved to a new location in South Cumberland, bounded by the C&O



Canal and Robert's Street. The facility was managed by the Tri-State Driving Club. A new grandstand, built in 1908, was "strong and substantially built, greets the eye. The seating arrangements are most perfect and at least 2,000 people can be seated with comfort... Below the grandstands is found the restaurant and café, women's and men's retiring rooms, and lockers. Two other buildings, the agricultural exhibit and the chicken show, have been erected." Photographs of the facility show a wooden grandstand, an oval track for horse races, and a parade/picnic ground. Some of the fairs at that location were hosted by the Cumberland Fair and Agricultural Association. After more than two decades of service, the property was sold to developers in 1917.

While those early venues hosted a number of public events including fairs, Allegany County did not provide a proper fairground facility that would support traditional agricultural expositions associated with a county fair. In 1920, Allegany County still maintained a distinctly agricultural identity as 999 farms, with an average of 153 acres, offered hundreds of potential exhibitors and visitors to a county fair. Civic leaders at the time noted that



surrounding communities were served by fairgrounds. According to United States Senator J. Glenn Beall Jr., “A group of citizens in Cumberland decided that the county would benefit from having a county fair. They had a county fair, but they needed a place for the fair to operate. They put together a community group and my grandfather, John Schwarzenbach, was treasurer.” The Cumberland Fair Association, Incorporated was subsequently organized in 1918. In addition to Mr. Schwarzenbach, Duncan Sloan served as President, Tasker Lowndes as Vice President, Virgil Powell as Secretary, while Henry Hodgson held the position of Chairman.

One of the association’s first decisions was consideration of a location that would offer an expanse of flat land, accessibility to major highways, and an affordable cost. All those conditions were met by a 97½ acre tract of farm land situated approximately two miles south of Cumberland along U.S. Route 220. Financing of the purchase was accomplished by the sale of bonds issued in denominations of \$100, \$200, and \$500, bearing a 6% annual interest rate for 25 years. Government entities were not involved in financing the project.

Another major consideration was the type of facility that would best meet the community’s needs. The



Nationally known jockey, Willie Shoemaker, received congratulations from Mr. Manley of the Cumberland Fair Association while United States Senator J. Glenn Beall looked on.



Horse racing enthusiasts carefully studied racing forms before placing their wagers.



Officials worked in the “crow’s nest” atop the grandstand to monitor races and record results.



association decided that a traditional style fairground, including a horse racing track, would be in order. Both one mile and half mile race tracks were included in the 1923 plans, as was a football field, a baseball diamond, exhibit halls, and stables. Possibly because of state regulations governing the horse racing circuit, the one mile track was eliminated in favor of a half mile one. For reasons unknown today, the general area became known as “Fairgo,” and the facility itself, “The Cumberland Fairgrounds.”

Implementation of the association’s plans was assisted by J. Glenn Beall Sr., Maryland State Senator from 1930-1934. While the elder Beall later left the State Senate to serve as a United States Senator, he continued to press for favorable racing dates at the local fairground by acting as an unofficial lobbyist. There were five county half mile tracks in Maryland at the time. And according to Senator J. Glenn Beall Jr., “They (county fairs) tried to get the half mile tracks ten days of racing, rather than five, because they weren’t making it on five days of racing. They couldn’t pay their expenses...Eventually the Cumberland Fair Association was having twelve days of racing a year and the County Fair for a week.” All racing dates were scheduled by The State Racing Commission.

Fairgo’s horse racing and community event schedules required the services of a General Manager. Harry Flook, Edgar “Buck” Reynolds, and Harry Barton, successively, held that title from the 1940’s until the 1960’s. According to J. Glenn Beall Jr., “In my time it was Harry Barton. Harry would start early in the spring with an advertising campaign. Then you had to make sure the grounds were in good shape. There was a lot of painting...upgrading of the parking lots, making contracts with the caterers. There was activity all year round...in order to get income. Activities included the annual fair, agricultural events, and entertainment. Isaac and Ethel Parker, who resided on the grounds from 1936 until 1976, directly assisted the General Managers by carrying out daily maintenance on the property.

Horse racing at Fairgo proved to be an economic stimulus to Allegany County. According to Senator J. Glenn Beall Jr., “Horse racing was a fun time. It was almost like a party season. People came from all over the state. They stayed here for the two weeks, so downtown was a hub of activity.”

Fairgo horse racing reached its peak of popularity in the immediate post World War II period and then declined. A proliferation of racetracks over the Tri-State area contributed to the demise by causing difficulties in filling a racing



card. Competing tracks offered up to sixty racing days, making it more profitable for horse owners to stay at a single venue. The Maryland Racing Commission's mandate that Fairgo facilities be updated proved to be economically impossible, so Allegany County's horse racing era ended following the 1961 Season.

Racing of a different kind began at Fairgo in 1966 when Harry Barton's son, John Barton, converted the track from a horse racing oval to one designed for automobile racing. This change required that special soil, called blue clay, be hauled to the dirt track. Blue clay provided maximum traction for the tires while also providing for banked curves to accommodate racing speeds of the vehicles.

Mr. Barton's ambitious plans were projected to cost \$60,000. Affiliation with three national automobile racing organizations, NASCAR, USAC, and ARCA, was also necessary. To initiate the changes, the track was renamed the Greater Cumberland Raceway, and John Barton assumed the title, Director of Racing. A two season schedule was to begin in the Summer of 1966.

Highlights from that race car era included the "Cumberland 200," a featured race held on June 19, 1966. "Tiger" Pistone won the NASCAR event before a crowd of 5,000 fans. Other drivers in the top ten included Neil "Soaps" Castel, Wendell Scott, Dick Freeman, Buck Baker, and Tony Lund.

Later that summer, Indianapolis style cars provided sprint racing competition. Noteworthy drivers were Don Branson, Roger McClusky, Bobby Unser, Arnie Knepper, and Mario Andretti. A local flavor was added to the races when John Ankeney, downtown businessman, offered his Offenhauser to Dave Lundy of Pittsburgh for a sprint car event.

Fairgo's oval track once again assumed a new look in 1968 when motorcycles became the main attraction. The nation's top motorcyclists were slated for a "6 Star Event." Unfortunately, heavy rains caused the race to be cancelled and

unfavorable weather continued to plague other events, preventing them from being economically successful. Several of the motorcycle races that were not affected by rainy weather conditions attracted large crowds.

Racing was absent from the fairgrounds until 1978-1979, when Ray Fullerton promoted stock car races. Racing continued in 1980 under the sponsorship of the Western Maryland Street Rod Association, Ray Welsh promoter, and in 1981-1982 through the sponsorship of

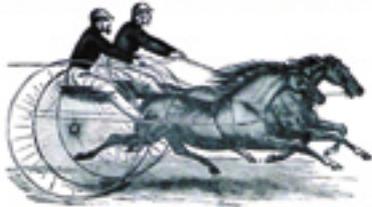


\$3,000 in Premiums!

THIRD ANNUAL FAIR

—OF THE—
Agricultural & Mechanical SOCIETY
 of Allegany County and West Virginia and Pennsylvania,

TO BE HELD AT THE SOCIETY'S GROUNDS IN
Cumberland, Md.,
 ON OCTOBER 17, 18, 19 & 20, 1871.



The Best Fair
 YET HELD.

Most Liberal Inducements!
 (See Premium List Published in Detail.)

GREAT TRIALS OF
FAST HORSES!

TROTTING PURSE, . . . \$600
RUNNING PURSE, . . . \$600

HALF-FARE TICKETS
 will be issued on the Baltimore and Ohio, Pittsburgh & Connellsville, and Cumberland & Pennsylvania RAILROADS.

EXTRA TRAINS will run on the Cumberland and Pennsylvania Railroad during the Fair.

Stock and articles for exhibition at the fair will be carried to Cumberland at regular rates, and returned **FREE**.

Entries may be made in advance and Tickets Secured

NO ENTRANCE FEE
 is charged in any Case, Except for Trials of Speed.

A FINE BAND WILL BE IN ATTENDANCE

ADMISSION: Single Tickets, 50 Cents; Children under 12 years, 25 Cents.
 Not sold here, if taken, the same being at charge, an additional Price for each Person 5 C.

The proprietors of order and the execution of the program will be the hands of
 The Agricultural Society, Cumberland, Md. J. W. Smith, Clerk, Cumberland, Md. J. W. Smith, Secretary, Cumberland, Md. J. W. Smith, Treasurer, Cumberland, Md. J. W. Smith, Treasurer, Cumberland, Md.

the Cresaptown Volunteer Fire Department, Ray Welsh promoter. The Fairgo track was closed after the 1982 season and did not reopen until 1986. Following that season racing became dormant until 1991, when Ben Evans acted as promoter. Bob Salthe promoted from 2001-2002, and Rick Jones from 2005 to the present.

There have been a lot of changes for race car drivers since Mario Andretti raced here in 1963 in the sprint car races, and with more changes to come in the near future. Today's drivers zoom around the dirt track in excess of 135 mph (possibly 150 mph on a tacky night surface) in Super Dirt Late Model cars. Pictured on the facing page is Bob Gordon, a regular at the fairgrounds and many other dirt race tracks. With several track championships under his belt there's no slowing down. Gordon holds the record for the most feature wins in a season for Limited Lates at the fairgrounds track.

Plans for an expanded automobile racing facility at Fairgo are currently under consideration by the Maryland Stadium Authority. The proposal is to upgrade the half mile dirt track and to construct a new road racing course downstream from the fairgrounds to Bowling Green, a distance of about one and one-half miles.

While the fairground has hosted motor racing events for four decades, older residents will also recall high school track meets and the carnival operators who brought sideshows and featured attractions to the facility for decades: Prell Shows, Amusements of America, Dell and Travers, Olympic Exposition, Deggerller, and currently, Reithoffer Shows.

Significant changes have occurred at the fairgrounds in recent years. The Cumberland Fair Association, original owner of the facility, sold its interests to the state of Maryland on May 9, 1986. Project Open Space funding provided most of the financial support, while Allegany County provided a smaller percentage of money. Under the guidelines of POS, facilities must offer free admission and be for public educational use; the fairgrounds were a perfect match for the taxpayers' dollars. David Kirk, longtime General Manager of the fairgrounds, was instrumental in planning the transition from private to public ownership. The state of Maryland subsequently donated the fairgrounds to Allegany County, hence the name change to Allegany County Fairgrounds.

During the late 1990's the fairgrounds hosted approximately 40 events per year. Following construction of the Multiple Purpose Building in 2001, a 25,000 square foot facility, the number of events has increased to 300 per year. Many times multiple events will occur simultaneously. According to Glenn Stahlman and Kevin Kammauff, there is something going on almost every weekend. This trend will continue as Allegany County officials continue to



© Lance C. Bell, PPA, 2007

Top and right photo: Bob Gordon, a popular racer at today's track.

Far right photo: Mario Andretti in the 1966 Sprint Car Races at the Fairgrounds.



prepare for the future. “We are not at the end of the old fairgrounds,” states Kevin Kammauff, “but at the beginning of a new one. And we are not going to run off our current renters. Instead, we will attract additional ones. Everything at the Allegany County Fairgrounds will be upgraded from the current facilities to a new motor sports complex.”

While plans move forward, mark your calendar for this year’s All-American summer experience; the Allegany County Fair will be held July 15-22. A partial list of fairground events is listed here, however a complete list is available from the Allegany County Fairgrounds Office, located in the Multiple Purpose Building at the fairgrounds, or by calling **301-729-1200**.

Mountain Discoveries would like to thank Glenn Stahlman and Kevin Kammauff of the Allegany County Fairgrounds for their generous assistance with this article. Also helpful was a 2003 interview with the late Senator J. Glenn Beall Jr.

Editor’s note: Look for the “Garrett County Fairgrounds” article in the Fall issue of *Mountain Discoveries*.



2007 Events at The Allegany County Fairgrounds

April - Nov.	Stock Car Racing
May 5	Train Show
May 19 and September 22	Gun and Cash Bashes
June 22 - 24	Schoolhouse Quilt Show
June 30 - July 2	Tri-State Car Show
July 15 - 22	Allegany County Fair and Ag-Expo
August 10 - 11	Cumberland Fireman’s \$1,000,000 Bash
August 25 - 26	Western MD Truck Show
Aug. 31 - Sept. 2	Western MD Street Rod Show
Sept. 14 - 16	Bowling Green VFD Taste of Fall Festival
Sept. 28 - 29	High Sierra Music Festival
Oct. 19 - 21	Upper Potomac Dog Show

For details & complete schedule 301-729-1200