

## **Fryeburg Fair began 160 years ago**

It's been 160 years since a handful of farmers and businessmen from Fryeburg, Hiram and Brownfield met at Sam Stickney's Inn in Brownfield to consider forming an agricultural society. Three weeks after that March 22, 1851 meeting, 175 people from five towns (Denmark and Lovell were added) gathered to craft 21 articles that were molded into bylaws that formed the West Oxford Agricultural Society. Maine Gov. John Hubbard approved the resulting act of incorporation June 3, 1851, the 31st Maine Legislature passed a special act incorporating the society and the charter was officially accepted Oct. 31, 1851.

The first fair was held in Hiram followed by Fryeburg, Lovell, Denmark, Porter and Brownfield. The seventh year's fair was held in Fryeburg, where it has remained.

Since those humble beginnings, Fryeburg Fair has grown to become Maine's largest agricultural fair complete with the world's largest steer and oxen show, a farm museum second to none, Maine largest camping area for a week, six days of harness racing, a world-class Woodmen's Day competition and a reputation known throughout North America.

The 8-day Blue Ribbon Classic has flourished since that first fair when William Walker of Lovell won \$3 for the best acre of corn and William Spring of Brownfield earned \$1 for the best seed wheat. Today, the early October fair boasts nearly 100 buildings on 185 acres in the Saco River Valley. Attracting upwards of 400,000 people annually, it is Maine's largest fair, second only in size in New England to the Eastern States Exposition in Springfield, Mass.

The original history of the fair emerged in the mid-1980s, thanks to well-documented records discovered by longtime fair trustee Donald Buzzell of Fryeburg. Two yellowing books, one of secretary reports, and the other a membership listing, were located in a shed cupboard at the Buzzell farmhouse purchased by Don's father in 1884.

Signing the original documents for the society formed "for the improvement of agriculture and horticulture" were General Pegleg Wadsworth of Hiram, president; David R. Hastings, a Lovell lawyer who served the original board as vice president; Thomas Souther of Fryeburg, recording secretary; and Isaac Spring of Brownfield, corresponding secretary and librarian.

At the initial Brownfield meeting in 1851, Wadsworth was chosen president and named along with Souther and Col. Edward S. Osgood to a committee to report on a constitution and by-laws, according to the original secretary's report.

Enthusiasm for the idea spread quickly through the original incorporating towns of Fryeburg, Hiram, Brownfield, Lovell, Denmark, Porter, Sweden, Waterford, Stow and Stoneham. Any resident of those towns could join by paying \$1 per year and a lifetime membership was available to the affluent for \$10.

The original fairgrounds in Fryeburg encompassed land purchased for \$37 near what would become the Portland-Ogdensburg Railroad depot. An adjoining lot was added in 1878, but fair officials were eager to find a new location for the successful fair with room to grow and add a

half-mile track. On Oct. 25, 1878, the society voted 76-59 to sell the land and change locations. Nothing more was done until Nov. 26, 1884 when it was voted to purchase 25 acres from Harrison McNeil for \$133 at the current site. The railroad land was sold for \$2,145. The first fair on the new grounds was held Oct. 6, 1885 after 27 years at the former site.

While the fair was the creation of a group of Maine men, they soon realized they could not go it alone. They voted to allow women into the membership in 1859 on payment of 25 cents annually.

In 1861, when fighting broke out during the Civil War, optimistic officials had already increased the annual exhibition from one to three days. With membership rolls from Maine down during the war, premiums were added to attract New Hampshire residents, although it would be another 40 years before they would officially be voted into society membership.

Fryeburg boasts many superlatives, from the largest steer and oxen show in the world and the oldest continuous 4-H beef steer sale in New England. Fryeburg officials continued with the sale during World War II while Eastern States curtailed its sale until after the war. A former President Emeritus and Maine legislator, Francis Buzzell chaired the first baby beef program, which this year will celebrate its 74th anniversary. Buzzell served on the original committee along with Phil Andrews, his brother, Donald Buzzell, and John Weston.

Andrews, a Finance Committee member for more than four decades, was elected president in 1991 when Francis Buzzell's health forced him to step down. Buzzell had been elected to the post in 1989 after the death of Earl Osgood, who had served as president for 28 years. Osgood succeeded Conway, N.H.'s J. Howard Woodward, for whom Woodward Pavilion is named. Woodward was elected a trustee in 1904, the first year New Hampshire residents were admitted to the society. He was named vice president in 1922 and president in 1928, a post he held until his death 38 years later.

Andrews, whose involvement with the fair spanned more than 50 years, died at age 88 just two weeks before the start of the 2002 fair. In December, David Hastings II was elected president. He retired at the end of 2006 and Roy Andrews was unanimously elected president, a position he continues to hold.

The fair's growth to eight days has been a gradual one. Trustees voted to expand the fair to four days in 1941 but World War II stalled the expansion until 1945. The fair grew to five days in 1954, seven a few years later and eight in 1981 when the second Sunday was added. While the fair continues to grow in popularity, officials say they are satisfied with keeping the event at eight days.