

Fair's Fair

By Douglas H. Shepard, 1999 and 2011

Next time you attend a local fair, such as the Fredonia Farm Festival or the County Fair, take a moment to pay your mental respects to what is a truly venerable tradition. These events that seem such a natural part of our annual landscape actually have had a long, complex and fascinating history. Back in April 1819 when all of Pomfret boasted a population of 2306 souls, 309 of them engaged in farming, the New York State Legislature enacted a law to promote improvements in agricultural methods and products. It provided for a State Board of Agriculture and for County Societies to promote agriculture and household manufactures. \$10,000 (later \$20,000) was set aside to provide for premiums for the top entries at each Fair held by a county society.

Acting on that incentive, some residents of Mayville distributed a notice of a meeting to be held there for the purpose of establishing the Chautauque [the original spelling] County Agricultural Society. However, fearing Mayville domination, a deep, dark plot was laid by Judge Zattu **Cushing**, Col. Thomas G. **Abell**, and other Fredonia worthies. A small contingent from the Village traveled to Mayville via Westfield, the only wagon road then open, on the day before the meeting, deliberately giving the impression that they were the delegation. However, early next morning, a much larger group, on horseback and under the command of Col. **Abell**, made its way via the Old Chautauqua Road through the woods, and waited a mile or two outside Mayville until the last minute. They then proceeded directly to the court house, joined the earlier contingent, making almost 200 in all, elected Judge **Cushing** its first president and enough Fredonians to the other offices to guarantee control of the organization and its fairs, and went home.

The Fairs in Fredonia's **Barker** Common

The maneuvering may have been a tactical triumph, but in fact, turned out to be a hollow victory. Although, under the Society's aegis, fairs were held from 1820 through 1824, there were few participants and little interest was shown. It could not have been the fault of the location, **Barker** Common, since it had been a popular central site for a variety of activities since 1808 when the Common was first cleared of stumps. That made it a very special place indeed, for many years to come. Imagine that you are able to have a birds-eye view of the Village in 1808 or 1818 or even 1828. What would be the most striking aspect of the landscape? The thickness of the tree tops. Everywhere you look is an ocean of leaves broken by a few ribbons of dirt roads, including the unusually wide Main Street. Barely seen just off to one side or another are partially cleared house lots, and especially outside the Village, larger clearings – islands in the green ocean – cultivated fields where crops are being raised. There is only one small opening in that entire expanse that is not built on or planted on, and that is the Common. Made by man, it is the only clearing in the dense forest that is not intended for some private use. It was an impressive gift from Hezekiah **Barker**, who lived to see it used for a great range of activities.

On July 4th, 1813, during the War of 1812, there was a patriotic gathering on the Common accompanied by dancing at **Barker's** tavern. That was the day when Judge Zattu **Cushing's** Fourth of July oration was interrupted by the news that a skirmish was taking place at the mouth of Canadaway Creek. At the beginning of March, 1815, some 200-300 people from surrounding towns gathered to celebrate the end of the war. "The order of the day was first to meet at the old Tavern [owned by the **Abells** but still the building that Hezekiah **Barker** had put up in 1808], then march in procession across the Common to the school house, and there listen to an oration adapted to the occasion by John **French**, a lawyer, at that day of considerable talent, and who subsequently had the honor of giving the name of Fredonia to our

village. From the school house (after passing through many evolutions on the Common) they returned to the Tavern and partook of a sumptuous dinner, got up in true pioneer style." Levi **Risley** recalled the first of the "bower dinners," as they were called, held by the innkeepers, the **Abells**, starting on St. John's Day, June 24th, 1816. Tables were set up under a bower on the Common near **Abell's** new tavern. (They had replaced **Barker's** simpler log cabin with a larger frame building in the Fall of 1815.) The main course was roast pig, and these bower dinners continued until well into the 1830s.

Obviously, then, the Common was a favorite gathering place for a variety of community activities, and it was there in 1820 that the first Chautauque County Agricultural Society Fair was held. It seems to have been a very modest affair consisting of an exhibition of prime stock. The second annual "Chautauque County Cattle Show and Fair" was also held there on 3 December 1821. The bower dinners, the Fourth of July celebrations, traveling circuses, etc., unlike the fairs, all took place during times of good weather. However, that is exactly the wrong time to ask farmers to leave off work to go to a Fair. For that reason, the earliest agricultural fairs were scheduled in December when the time could be spared, and barring a snowstorm, travel on frozen roads was easier than on the rutted, mud-filled warm-weather roads. So perhaps it was the weather that helped keep the attendance low in the early years. In addition, the Fair drew only on a population close enough to visit for the day and still have time to walk or ride a horse home – not too many.

Henry **Frisbee** was not at all kind when he reported on the Second Annual fair in his new *New York Censor* of 11 December 1821. "The Chautauque county Cattle Show and Fair (such as it was), was held in this village on Tuesday last. The exhibition excited very little interest, so little that we were not able, yesterday, to ascertain on whom many of the premiums were bestowed. We are sure, however, that no extraordinary specimens of domestic manufacture were exhibited. The 1st premium, of \$8, on the best cultivated farm, was awarded to Joel **Harrington**, and the 2d best, of \$5 to Col. Benj. **Perry**; the 1st premium of \$5 for the best 25 acres, to Thomas G. **Abell**, 2d best, \$4 to Nathaniel **Crosby**; -- best acre of corn and best acre of flax \$5 and \$6 to Thomas G. **Abell**. The 1st and 2d premiums of \$8 and \$6 on the first and second best 20 yards fulled cloth were awarded to the Hon. Zattu **Cushing**. While we have the most glowing descriptions of the celebrations of the farmer's holiday in the eastern part of the state, [**Frisbee** had an article in the same issue about the State Fair] we are sorry to see so little importance attached to it by the farmers in this county. It is manifest that the society has decreased since last season; and it evidently appears that the liberality of the state is not met by a corresponding spirit on the part of our citizens. No more has been done than to comply with the strict letter of the law, and at each Fair a few individuals, with very ordinary exertions, have succeeded in carrying off the profits and the honor, (if any there is) without the body of the people participating at all in them."

Not a very positive picture. However, whatever the cause, the ultimate result after another three years was the abandonment of the whole enterprise. With the Chautauque Agricultural Society's Fair on the Common on December 22, 1824, the organization had a quiet, and apparently lamented, death. Not until twelve years later did interest become revived. In 1836 the organization was begun again with the encouragement of Jabez **Burrows** of Mayville. The first annual fair of the re-formed Chautauque County Agricultural Society was held in Mayville early in October 1838. The *Mayville Sentinel* called the fair "the first thing of the kind ever attempted in the county" and was roundly scolded by the *Fredonia Censor* for having forgotten "that an Agricultural Society was once before formed in this county, in which the people of this section took part." Under the new leadership, fairs were held at various locations: Mayville, as we have seen, Panama, Delanti (now Stockton), Westfield, and in 1857, Fredonia.

The Fairs on Fredonia's Forest Hill

At the 1857 business meeting – which began each year’s events – it was decided to have the fair in Fredonia again in 1858, and thereafter, to hold the fair in the same place for each of two years. The reason was the expense of obtaining an adequate site and putting up tents or temporary buildings. What seems to have prompted this new policy was the great effort that had gone into the very successful 1857 Fair and the gratifying response of those in attendance. The local committee had been able to lease 13 acres of the old Squire **White** farm in August 1857. **White** had died the previous April and the estate was being divided into various parcels to be sold off. The announcement of the estate sale included a description of the “home lot on the North side of Main Street, which is to be subdivided by opening a street (called **White** Street) through it to Free or Cemetery Street (today’s **Lambert** Avenue]. It contains twenty-one acres, including the greater portion of the beautiful lot occupied for the Agricultural Society’s Fair. It is divided into 13 lots, mostly small – about ½ acre each.” The piece used for the Fair covered what is now roughly the southern half of Forest Hill Cemetery. In fact, because the land originally was seen as fronting on “the North side of [East] Main Street” and extending back from there, the rear line of those lots paralleled East Main Street, which is why the southerly line of the Cemetery then (now Stillman Avenue) instead of running in from the entrance at a right angle to **Lambert** Avenue, ran northeasterly. It was below that line that part of the land was used for the Fair. It included an open field, a grove of trees, and a large, oval race track a half mile in length. A high wooden fence surrounded it all.

On September 16th, the local committee called for volunteers to help put up the Agricultural tent. It was the effort and expense of putting up temporary buildings or tents to house the various exhibits that had prompted the committee to recommend using a site two years’ running. By this time, the 1850s, these fairs had become much more than just an exhibition of prize animals. The *Censor’s* reference to “the annual gathering of the Farmers and Mechanics to compare the results of their industry and skill” (on 28 September 1857) indicates that agricultural products were only a part of the mix. In those days, “Mechanic” meant something close to “artisan” or “skilled craftsman.” The 1857 Fair had an exhibition of “pure blooded cattle,” a tent “assigned to the exhibition of agricultural implements, &c., and another to domestic indoor articles.” One very popular item was the small printing press used by J. R. **Parker** to stamp seed papers, the wrappers that **Parker**, the **Risleys**, and others used to package their garden seeds. The domestic tent included items such as “Ladies’ needlework,” “specimens of Dentistry,” and daguerreotypes. Another tent housed various prize fruits and vegetables, cane syrup and the like.

By resolution of the directors, the fair was to be held in the same place in 1858. Ambitious plans were laid, which included issuing a promotional newsletter, the Agricultural Bulletin which first appeared on 3 September 1858. By that time, a fence was being put up again, the track graded, and tents were being raised. The work was worth it. The entries were up, 1434 as compared to 1857’s 920. Attendance was an unprecedented 25,000 over the three days. Total receipts in 1857 had been \$1600. In 1858 they were: \$143.77 remaining from 1857, a matching \$143.00 from the State, \$76.00 ground rent (for refreshment booths, etc.), and \$1661.81 in admissions, for a grand total of \$2024.58 [worth at least \$55,000 in 2011], and that was without counting the amount to be received from selling “the timber in fences and building fixtures.” It must have been the overwhelming success of the Agricultural Society that brought about the formation of a parallel local group, the Chautauque Farmers’ and Mechanics’ Union, on 14 March 1859. Under New York State law, an agricultural “society” represented a county, while a “union” represented more than one town. Another motivating factor may have been that the home lot of the **White** estate had been marked off in building lots, and the opportunity to rent all those acres would probably soon be gone, so the Union’s first order of business was to consider buying the grounds.

A general meeting was held on 20 July 1859, at which it was agreed to buy 13 acres, which included a wooded grove, the race track area, and some open ground for buildings and booths. (There were actually five separate parcels acquired between 1859 and 1866 that made up the Fairgrounds.) Once the Union had secured the major lot of 13 acres, they arranged to hold their own fair on September 28, 29 and 30, 1859, so as not to interfere too much with the Chautauque County Fair at Jamestown on September 13, 14 and 15. This pattern continued for some ten years, with the County Fairs every two years at various locales throughout the County, and the Union Fairs at their own grounds in Fredonia, which were also rented out for other events during the rest of the year. The Union Fairs in Fredonia, like the County and other local Fairs, gradually added more and more non-agricultural items and events. In addition to souvenirs and trinket booths, refreshment stands and the like, there were foot races, hurdle jumps, ball games and the ever-popular horse racing.

Those races were always trotting races, using the heavy, old-fashioned sulky. Flat racing was “foreign,” suspect, and close to sinful. (That’s what Meredith **Wilson** had in mind in *Music Man*, when he had Harold Hill deplore as modern decadence the idea of some upstart actually sitting up on Dan Patch, the famous trotter.) As popular as the races were, they were always a concern, because they shifted the emphasis away from displays of superior blooded stock to speed for its own sake. Besides that, it encouraged gambling. The other serious problem was the unseemly noise and turmoil if there happened to be a burial ceremony going on just over the fence in Forest Hill Cemetery. Nevertheless, the trotting races were very popular, and one of their major proponents was William **Moore**, a prominent local cattle dealer and horse breeder. Shortly after the first Union Fair, a group calling itself the Chautauque Horse Association, William **Moore**, President, J. C. **Mullett**, Secretary (who was also secretary of the Union association) was formed. They planned an elaborate two-day “First Annual Horse Show” at the Union’s Fairgrounds, with the proceeds to go to the Union’s fund. Unfortunately, bad weather postponed it, and it had to be put off until the following year. **Moore** also continued his involvement with the Union as Superintendent of Horses.

Over the years, with a permanent location available, permanent buildings were added to the Fairgrounds and old ones were repaired and extended. In addition to stalls and pens, there was Mechanics’ Hall, displaying furniture, leather work, tinware, etc; Vegetable Hall; and Floral Hall, which included displays of fruit, honey, and flowers. In 1928, G. E. **Montague** described what he remembered of the Union’s October 1865 7th Annual Fair and Cattle Show. “The grounds were enclosed by a high rough board fence, and facing this were pens in which were the cattle, horses and swine. There were two buildings about 35 by 60 feet in size, designated as Floral Hall and Agricultural Hall, in which the displays of flowers, fruits and vegetables were held. There were at that time only two breeds of cattle in this vicinity, the Durham or Shorthorn, and the Devonshire, neither of which was considered a purebred. The greatest attraction, perhaps, was the number of oxen and steers with yoke. I think there were as many as 25 pairs, old and young at that fair. And the boy who received a blue ribbon and perhaps a two dollar bill for the best yoke of calves or yearlings, well broken, was as proud as the man of today who gets many prizes with his registered stock. There were of course the races. ‘Oh Boy we thought them great!’ The sulkeys [sic] used were high wheeled heavy affairs which needed a good harness to draw. The horses were mostly locally owned and driven by the owner. Among the drivers we recall the names of George **Risley**, Levi **Harrison**, George N. (Nelt) **Frost**, Hial **Fox**. Best time about 3:30. Then there was a foot race by Indians from the reservation, which created a great amount of fun among the boys, and considerable betting among the men.”

In 1867 the Union decided to build a new Floral Hall in the form of a Greek cross, two stories high, and big enough to hold all the indoor exhibits. In 1869, the Good Templars had a restaurant with hot meals

near the speaker's stand, and the Children's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church sold ice cream, coffee and cake at a stand at Floral Hall. In addition, there was a croquet match, an Indian war dance and the trotting races, which were not as interesting as they might have been, since William **Moore's** "Chautauque Belle" won so many of the heats. Despite that, it was a fine fair, but, it turned out, the last. Forest Hill Cemetery as it then stood was beginning to fill up and the noise and dust from the Fairgrounds continued to be an annoyance, so negotiations had begun for the Cemetery Association to buy the grounds from the Union. It was discussed at the Union's Annual Meeting in January 1870 and quickly agreed to. At the same time, William **Moore** and others were appointed a committee to identify another location for their fairgrounds.

The Fairs on Central Avenue

After they reported back on February 12th, the decision was made to buy what was then called the **Abell** lot, just off Central Avenue in Dunkirk, and to lease "**Hunt's Grove**" adjoining it. Ultimately, the deal fell through and the Chautauque Farmers' and Mechanics' Union ceased to exist. However, as a substitute, William **Moore** took part of his land just off McAllister Road, called the **Kaple** farm, and built a half-mile of trotting track on it. A small association was formed with Horace **White** as President, P. H. **Stevens**, Secretary, to oversee the annual horse fairs and races held at what was variously called the Fredonia Driving Park, the New Fairground, and **Moore's** Driving Park. Those annual events continued, although never with enormous success, through 1880. In January of that year, a local group met to consider creating yet another "agricultural society and driving track for northern Chautauqua," representing Sinclairville, Fredonia, and Dunkirk. The association was incorporated and began considering locations for a permanent Fairgrounds. Again the **Abell** lot was looked at, and this time, the sale went through. With that competition in sight, **Moore's** Driving Park was abandoned, and the land returned to farming. **Moore** himself died in December of 1881.

The Agricultural Society of Northern Chautauqua offered an impressive set of grounds and buildings. Initially there was an ornamental gateway, a secretary's office, the main exhibit building (also in the form of a Greek cross), a grandstand seating 1240 with refreshments underneath, and a judges' stand. As usual, the grounds were also rented out for other events during the year. The Society did well for a number of years, but by 1890 it fell into default, and the grounds and buildings had to be sold off. A group of local businessmen bought the grounds, intending to keep up the race track. In the meantime, the Chautauqua County Agricultural Society, which had been holding annual fairs since 1836, at Jamestown in recent years, cancelled the fair for 1896 because attendance in the past few years had been so poor. It was suggested that their fair alternate between Jamestown and the Fredonia-Dunkirk grounds, to maintain interest, but when the Society looked into the possibility of purchasing those grounds, it was found that there was a conflict of title. It seems that in November 1890, the land was sold at a Sheriff's sale to a group headed by M. M. **Fenner**; however, in the previous October, the County Treasurer had sold the same land to someone else for unpaid taxes. A court battle finally, in May 1898, settled the suit in **Fenner's** favor. In the following August, he sold the property to a new group, the Chautauqua County Fair Association, and he became the Superintendent of the Grounds. He had the buildings refurbished and ready to go for the First Annual Chautauqua County Fair in 1900.

For various reasons, this Society also languished, and no fair at all was held in 1916, at which point the grounds reverted to the **Fenner** estate. Under the aegis of Arthur R. **Maytum**, he, along with the Merchants Exchange of Dunkirk, organized yet another group, the Chautauqua County Agricultural Corporation, on 6 July 1917, which took over the old property on Central Avenue. Since the group was a corporation, it issued stock, 15,000 shares by 1918. Over the years, however, the identity of the

shareholders was lost, and it became necessary under new and more stringent laws to reorganize once again. In March 1971, this was done, and the Chautauqua County Agricultural and County Fair Association was formed. In 1972, it formally "merged" with the older corporation to complete the reorganization. Meanwhile, in a move that might have gladdened the hearts of Zattu **Cushing** and the other Village founders, a Fredonia Farm Festival was begun on July 31, 1969, on the very spot where, 150 years before, **Cushing, Abell** and the others had planned to have their Agricultural Society Fair. Of course, the Farm Festival has survived for over 40 years, and with the County Fair at the Fairgrounds, continues a long, sometimes sporadic, but venerable tradition. As we said at the beginning, next time you attend, enjoy what the present has to offer, but give a thought at the same time to its long, eventful past.