

## Calendar of Events

- Aug. 8 **When We Were Young**, Lake Crystal High School
- 15-19 125th Blue Earth County Fair, Garden City
- 19 **When We Were Young**, Garden City, Fairgrounds
- Sept. 1-9 Harvest of Quilts, Winona County Historical Society (Four of our quilts are to be displayed including "The Blue Earth County Quilt".)
- 8 Southern Minnesota Historical Assembly Annual Meeting, Good Counsel Education Center, Mankato
- 8 **When We Were Young**, Town and Country Leisure Center, Mapleton
- 15 **When We Were Young**, St. Clair High School
- 25 "Harvest Festival", Blue Earth County Historical Society Museum Grounds, 12-5 p.m. (Music, **When We Were Young**, Refreshments, etc.)
- Nov. 4 Opening Day Tea, Annual Bazaar
- 5-9 Bazaar Continues

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## Help Wanted

Volunteers are needed for both the Harvest Festival and the Bazaar.

### Harvest Festival:

1. Food Booth Workers
2. Country Store/Weed Store Workers
3. Craft Demonstration Coordinator
4. Programs Coordinator

### Bazaar

1. Sales Chair
2. Cookie/Bar Bakers
3. Servers

Call the Museum (345-4154) if you wish to help. The proper person will then be in touch with you.

## From the Director's Rolltop . . .

Denise Schmidt

On Saturday, September 8, the BECHS will be serving as the host society for the annual meeting of the Southern Minnesota Historical Assembly. The meeting will be held at the Good Counsel Education Center. Featured speakers will be Pat Miller, Director of the Illinois Heritage Association in Champaign, Illinois, and Mark Peterson, Director of the Winona County Historical Society. The theme for the day will be "Working Together". The meeting is open to anyone interested in historical society work. Registration will begin at 9:00 a.m. and the sessions will be completed by 4:00 p.m. The day will include a bus tour of Mankato and refreshments at the Museum. If you would like more information, contact Denise at the Museum or Marcia Schuster at 625-6314.

The County Fair celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. The Fair is always a grand event and this year should prove to be no exception. The Historical Society exhibit will feature photos of agricultural life in the county. We will also have the photo exhibit of the Rapidan Dam up. (**When We Were Young** is scheduled at 2:00 p.m. in the Free Grandstand.) Stop by and see us at the Fair!!!

*Denise*

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## Request for Information

Eva Beck Jenson, 3430 Arapaho Pl. W., Seattle, WA 98199, is seeking correct addresses of descendants of George DOLAND; b 1831, d 1909; wife Ann FARMER DOLAND; b 1832, d 1899, Garden City or Medo Township.

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## Welcome to New Members

Rich and Fay Krause - - Couple  
Randy Munsen - - Student

A **memorial** has been received to Donald H. Nelson.

Blue Earth County  
Historical Society

606 South Broad  
Mankato, MN 56001

Address Correction Requested

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Mankato, MN 56001  
Permit No. 343

# Blue Earth County Historical Society Newsletter

## August 1984

## Pioneer Fairs in Blue Earth County

Inella Burns

Although the Blue Earth County Fair in Garden City is the earliest in the state, two other county fairs, the Blue Earth Valley Fair and the Mankato Fair, were held concurrently with it beginning in the 1870's. As people often attended all three fairs, bringing exhibits to each, a neighborly sociability prevailed; yet among the three associations that governed the fairs, a spirit of friendly rivalry developed, each vying with the others to be best. General James T. Baker, speaking at the Blue Earth Valley Fair in Pleasant Mound in 1885 recognized this. "I have traveled over the state a good deal," he said, "attending a good many fairs, but this is the only county in the state where has been witnessed three excellent and successful fairs within its limits. At Garden City, here at Pleasant Mound, and at Mankato have been held fairs, any of which would require a half dozen of the average counties of Northern Minnesota to equal."

### The Blue Earth County Fair - Garden City

Almost every account of the Blue Earth County Fair in Garden City proclaims the picturesque beauty of its grounds, a huge natural amphitheater formed by a horseshoe curve of the Watonwan river. Giant oaks offer shade to fair visitors, and with the surrounding wooded hills provide a riot of color during autumn days.

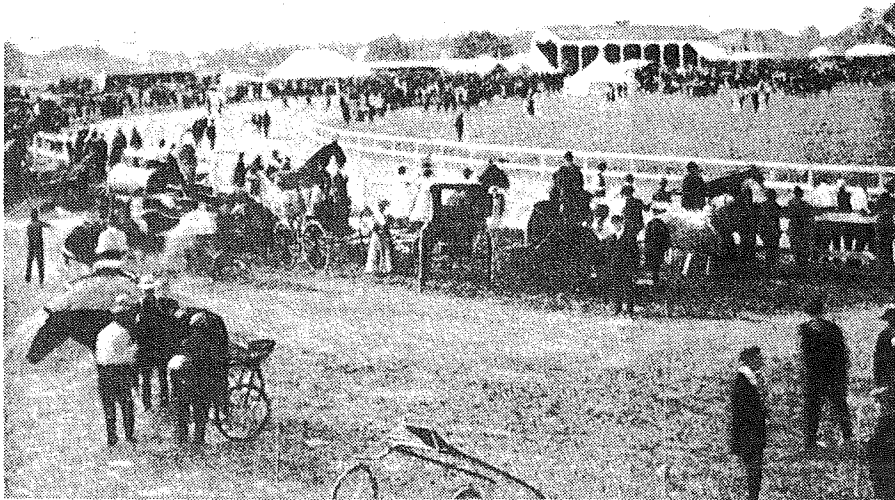
The Blue Earth County Agricultural Association held Minnesota's first county fair in 1859 at South Bend, and it was not until 1864 that the fair permanently settled in on the Garden City grounds. Because of the Sioux Uprising in 1862, no fairs were held that year or in 1863.

Among the officers of the first fair in 1859 were J.G. Thompson, John Diamond, Daniel Buck, Isaac Bundy, and J.S. Parks. In addition to fair

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### Sources

Thomas Hughes, History of Blue Earth County; Mankato Free Press, Sept. 4, 1885, Oct. 2, 1885, Jul. 30, 1949; Mankato Review, Oct. 6, 1885; Blue Earth County Historical Society Archives, unidentified newspaper clippings; photographs from Tom Hagen; interview with Vern Lundin.



View of Fair Grounds, Mankato, Minn.

NEW YORK 1898

exhibits and featured speakers, early fairs had ball games, horse-pulling and man-pulling contests, foot races, and horse shoe pitching. Horse racing was a featured attraction but was abandoned in the 1920's.

Music was provided by bands, sometimes as many as seven, from nearby towns. During some of the fairs, music also came from the morning glory speaker of an Edison phonograph. For five cents, fair visitors could select a tune to play from the large stock of cylindrical records.

In the Mankato Free Press account of the Blue Earth County Fair of 1885, livestock exhibits were reported to be so outstanding that "Blue Earth County bids fair to become the banner stock county of Southern Minnesota." Among the many entries were C.H. Piper's cattle from his herd of Aberdeen Angus, "all looking as sleek and fat as well they could." Other livestock exhibits included "Sam Borra," a massive white stallion owned by the Garden City Horse Company, and a number of sheep, hogs, and poultry.

The agriculture department in 1885 was "a pleasure to the eye," according to one newspaper reviewer, who added, "We say it reluctantly, but honestly, that this department was far ahead of the same at the Mankato Fair." In a display of large rutabagas, cabbages, and other vegetables was a squash weighing 145 pounds, "which made one think of pie and sauce for all time to come." Also exhibited was a variety of Canadian beans that could be threshed in two months from the date of

planting.

Among the fancywork, flowers, paintings, fruits, and culinary arts that filled the floral hall was Maggie Glynn's crazy-work silk pillow, "as intricate a piece of work as we ever looked on." A hair bouquet made by Miss Emma Gilman also elicited much praise, as did Mrs. J.C. Curryer's cabinet of fancy butterwork.

All during the 1885 Blue Earth County Fair, the ladies of Garden City served meals, "highly appreciated by the hungry, many of whom dined sumptuously for a quarter."

#### The Blue Earth Valley Fair - Pleasant Mound

The Blue Earth Valley Fair Association was organized in 1876 by the people of Pleasant Mound and Shelby townships. Grounds were set aside for the fair's use in Wilder's grove or at the farms of L.F. McKibbin or J.D. Heritage. At first only a stock show to exhibit Norman Percheron horses, it soon developed into a complete fair. According to an account in Mankato's *The Review*, the eighth annual fair in 1885 was a "pleasant neighborhood reunion," with 2500 to 3000 attending. Fair association officers that year were J.S. Parks, O.H. Brown, J.D. Heritage, and E.D. Cornish.

Besides the Percheron horses and other breeds, livestock exhibited at the 1885 fair included cattle, hogs, sheep, and poultry. The floral hall was filled with articles of ladies' needlework and culinary arts, "a collection that would have done honor to any county. The display of vegetables and native fruits was both larger than at the Mankato and Garden City fairs, while the collection of corn was much better and greater as to

varieties than at either fairs."

#### Mankato Fairs

People from miles around came as early as 1873 to the Mankato fairs at Brooks' farm and later Driving Park, where a mile track accommodated horse racing, a principal attraction of the fairs. Among the organizers of the first Mankato Fair were James Hubbell, Samuel Randall, R.D. Hubbard, G. Warner, and Henry Shaubut. The fairgrounds, located north of what is now Brooks Avenue, had a number of buildings including a large grandstand and an elaborate floral hall.

The fair's largest exhibit was livestock, but it was horse-racing that drew local people in great numbers and those of English descent from as far away as LeMars and Sioux City, Iowa. Local management even arranged hurdle races especially for the English patrons. One year there were 120 entries of race horses, some of fine blooded stock, at the fair. An exciting incident was reported in one race. A woman riding a big grey horse lost control and the horse was a runaway for five miles around the track before it could be stopped.

But the first fair association had planned too elaborately, and after about five years of spending more than the gate receipts brought in, the promoters closed out, sold the buildings, and paid the loss out of their own pockets.

In 1884 the Southern Minnesota Livestock and Fair Association made a second attempt to have fairs in Mankato, this time at Sibley Mound. Promoters of this enterprise were Frank Merrill, manager, and Ed Weaver, Martin Jordan, Henry Himmelman, Jr., P.H. Carney, C.E. Wise, and George Pond. The Mankato Free Press reported the 1885 fair to be "the best ever held in Southern Minnesota." The association has erected a grandstand, a livestock building, and a floral hall as well as laying out a good race track where the horse races were held and "some very speedy time made." Of special note in the floral hall of fine arts were a handsome hand-painted tea set of twelve pieces, no two alike; a crazy quilt made by Mrs. R.D. Hubbard, and wood carvings by Miss Clara Piper. In the center of the hall were heaps of fruit, jellies, honey, canned goods and bakery goods.

The 1885 Mankato Fair also included exhibits from business and industry. The Empire Store had "A most gorgeous collection of cloaks, shawls, laces, gloves, and fans . . . all arranged after the dictates of Mr. Brett and his competent assistants." Lamm and Schroeder displayed a variety of stoves; and Schmidt's showed harnesses, robes, carriage afghans and saddlery.

But again the fair association had planned too

elaborately, and within five years, they had to sell out. This time the city of Mankato bought the equity, moved the buildings, and turned the property into what is now Sibley Park.

A third and more successful attempt to have a Mankato fair was made in 1905 by the Mankato Fair and Blue Earth County Agricultural Association under the direction of George Atchison, Henry Hance, Clarence Saulpaugh, and John Krost. The fairgrounds in the area of First Avenue and Chestnut Street (now largely within the property of Continental Can Company) were purchased and the race track was built through subscriptions from Mankato merchants and individual citizens.

When the first fair was held, rain threatened to spoil everything, but an estimated crowd of 8,000 people attended. In spite of the rain and mud, there was great enthusiasm over the races. An elderly sportsman known as Old Man Loomis, who had entered a fine horse in the racing events, won the first race, "racing his horse in mud to the ankles, the noble pacer rising gallantly to the occasion."

For over two decades, the Mankato Fair was relatively successful, adding a barn (1916) in cooperation with the Caledonia Curling Club, who used it in the winter months. But during the 1930's the fair association, like its predecessors, faced financial difficulties, and the property, which was worth considerably more than the indebtedness, was deeded to the city in return for satisfying the mortgages. One condition of the transfer was that the city of Mankato maintain permanent facilities for the continuation of the 4-H portion of the fairs. Still governed by the Mankato Fair and Blue Earth County Agricultural Association, these fairs are currently held each year at the 4-H club grounds, now located on Highway 14 at the east edge of Mankato.

All of these early Blue Earth County fairs began with a group of enthusiastic promoters and a farm willing to host the enterprise. As the fairs grew into important social and agricultural events, they added considerable incentive toward achieving the high quality in farm production that Blue Earth County enjoys today.