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ON THE COVER: The Baldwin School, founded by the Rev. Edward D. Neill, after he secured a charter for the school from the 1853 Territorial Legislature. It was named for a Philadelphia locomotive builder, M. W. Baldwin, who helped finance the school. This two-story brick building stood on West Fifth Street, across from Rice Park, the present site of the Old Federal Courts Building. The school building served as a post office from 1857 to 1862.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: All pictures used in this issue are from the audio-visual department of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.



Minnesota State Fairgrounds, St. Paul, about the turn of the century.

Minnesota's Wandering State Fair And How it Settled in St. Paul

BY GORDON HAYES

The Minnesota State Fair, under the direction of the Minnesota State Agricultural Society, lures more than a million people annually. But the Fair and the Society didn't always enjoy the stability and cohesion they do today. The critical years of their development were between 1852 and 1885.

By 1852 Minnesota's leading settlers realized that one of the state's major natural resources, its fertile soil, required widespread use if the area were to prosper. There were less than 10,000 white settlers in the territory. It was felt that agricultural fairs would attract thousands of new settlers to the territory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gordon Hayes is a graduate of the University of Minnesota with a major in journalism. This is the second article he has contributed to *Ramsey County History*. His first, on the early history of the St. Paul Saints, appeared in the Spring, 1973, issue.

The first agricultural society was incorporated on March 6, 1852. Known as the Benton County Society, it existed only on paper and never held a fair. On March 7, 1852, the Ramsey County Agricultural Society received a legislative charter, and in March of 1853, the Territorial Legislature incorporated the Hennepin County Agricultural Society. Colonel John H. Stevens, the first white man to settle in what is now Minneapolis, was a leader in the Society.

AT ITS FIRST meeting, the Hennepin County Society decided that a territorial society should be formed. A special meeting was called, with delegates from the Hennepin, Ramsey, and Benton county societies and other counties as well.

Although the Hennepin County society retained its autonomy, the Minnesota Agricultural Society was formed with Willis A.

Gorman, who was appointed territorial governor in 1853, as Society president. He said Minnesota was destined to become a great wheat growing state. However, no agricultural fairs were held in 1853.

Finally, in 1854, an enormously successful fair was held in Minneapolis, on the site of Bridge Square. There were exhibits of grain, roots, vegetables, livestock, poultry, dairy products, fine arts and women's work. The cash premium rewards amounted to several hundred dollars, and there were more than fifty exhibitors. The Hennepin County Agricultural Society's president reported visitors from eastern and middle western states who decided to settle in Minnesota Territory.

THE NEXT TWO fairs were held in Minneapolis. St. Paul was the site of the 1857 Territorial Fair. It was held at Capitol Square, Exchange and Wabasha, but it was a financial failure. The appalling panic of 1857 was sweeping the country. The people of St. Paul had subscribed \$1,200 to the Fair, but only \$200 was collected. Premiums were prorated and many awards were paid off in diplomas.

No Fair was held in 1858, despite the fact that Minnesota was admitted to the Union that year as the 32nd state. The 1857 financial panic had not subsided, although the population had soared from 4,000 to 150,000 during the territorial years. By 1860, settlers had increased this figure to 172,000. Still, the Depression lingered. No one had money, the harvest was modest and the only currency in circulation were bank bills and state-issued notes.

Signs that better times were coming could be seen in the beginning of railroad construction and settlement of more farm land, but the Agricultural Society remained in difficulty. Many felt it would die, but its officers and its friends refused to abandon it.

In 1859, both the State Agricultural Society and the Hennepin society decided they could not hold a fair by themselves, so they agreed to hold a "Union Fair" at Minneapolis in October. Prize money was minuscule. There was a lack of entries. A slim turnout of 3,000 people took advantage of the 25-cent admission price.

Before 1860, the State Agricultural Society had practically no existence under the law as a chartered organization with powers

of a corporate body. To amend this, the 1860 legislature passed a law giving the organization a legal foundation and providing the necessary tools for growth.

THE SOCIETY officially became known as the "Minnesota State Agricultural Society." Its membership, with nearly a hundred committee men and executive officers, was fairly distinguished and much was expected from it. Two major problems loomed. The Society lacked money and property.

In August, 1860, the leaders of the State Agricultural Society met at St. Paul and decided to hold the Fair at Fort Snelling. Franklin Steele, a former sutler at the Fort who owned large tracts of land in the area, allowed the Society to use the land free of charge. The Fair of 1860 was a success. The weather was beautiful. The crowd was the largest ever assembled in Minnesota up to that time.

The talent, beauty, and fashion of Minnesota were on parade — the men with big bell-crowned hats, Prince Albert coats, Marseilles vests, and elaborate neckerchiefs; the women in mantillas, pretty small bonnets and large crinolines twelve feet in circumference. The spirit of democracy and social equality prevailed.

The exhibits were remarkable. There were onions seventeen inches in circumference, radishes twenty-eight inches around, squashes five-and-a-half feet, Irish potatoes a foot long and four inches around, and other phenomenal examples of what Minnesota soil could produce.

FAIR authorities promised an even better Fair in 1861, but the outbreak of the Civil War prevented that. Plans called for a Fair in 1862 but were abandoned because of the Sioux War which broke out that August.

However, 1862 marked the beginning of a new era for Minnesota agriculture. The first section of railroad in the State was completed between St. Paul and St. Anthony. In past years, millions of bushels of wheat could only be sent to market by boat, when the Mississippi River was open. In the winter and early spring, when wheat prices were up, the river was closed, ice-bound. The coming of railroads with eventual links to the East, would change all this.

In 1863, the Fair was held outside the



Col. William S. King

walls of Fort Snelling. The exhibits were fair, with the exception of the sheep. They were especially attractive to stockmen and convinced many observers that Minnesota was suitable for sheep-raising.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* aptly described that year's fair: "The late fair at Fort Snelling was in just no sense a State Fair. The exhibition of agricultural products would scarcely have been credible to a town fair much less a county fair, in any portion of the State that had been settled for five years. It was a ridiculous failure, a burlesque, and nearly all who attended it considered themselves egregiously sold."

THE FAIR did not return to St. Paul until 1871. During that interval, fairs met with partial success. Horace Greeley spoke at the 1865 Fair. But from 1865 to 1870 Minnesota agriculture developed rapidly, and there was a great influx of immigrants.

The State Agricultural Board decided to hold the 1871 Fair at Kittsondale, a million-dollar stable and race track owned by the famed fur trader, Norman Kittson. Located near what is now University and Snelling Avenues, the stable was on the main road between St. Paul and Minneapolis. But there was one problem. Board members from Min-

neapolis, including Colonel William S. King, were disgusted because the selection seemed to indicate St. Paul was to be the Fair's permanent home.

They retaliated by holding a Fair on the Hennepin County Grounds two weeks before the State Fair. Horace Greeley spoke and Colonel King showed his thoroughbred cattle. Then, instead of showing them at St. Paul two weeks later, King took them to the Illinois State Fair. St. Paul businessmen were in an uproar. The people of St. Paul, the larger of the two cities with a population of 20,030, met the challenge. They publicized the State Fair in resounding fashion. Letters and news stories were written, circulars sent out. For the first time, farm products raised along the line of the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad, running from St. Paul to Duluth, were shown, and they included a 120-pound squash, seventeen-pound beets, thirty-pound cabbages, and turnips, potatoes, and other vegetables.

"The Fair was considered invaluable as an advertising medium and everyone, except the Minneapolis zealots, was satisfied," one commentator remarked.

THE KITTSONDALE grounds were used until 1876. The 1872 Fair was noted for large displays of livestock. At that time, a variety of new breeds was being introduced into the state. The railroads had their first extensive exhibits. The first iron ore was brought from the Mesabi range.

The key to the 1872 Fair was that it initiated the close relationship between the Fair and the railroads. Later, the railroad companies distributed advertising literature to all lines in the Fair's territory and every depot displayed a Fair poster. Special excursion rates were offered. The railroad, in short, was the chief factor in the growth of the State Fair. Colonel King again stirred up controversy by sending the best of his herd to the Illinois Fair.

The fairs of 1873, 1874, 1875 and 1876 met with little success. In 1873, a panic again swept the country. In 1874 crops were poor because of the weather and the great grasshopper plague. Grasshoppers again invaded the crops in 1875 and 1876.

At the Society meeting in 1877, Colonel King announced that he thought a permanent site should be selected for the Fair.

A committee was set up for this purpose. Colonel King was elected president of the Society. The Fair returned to Minneapolis that year largely because of King's efforts. He was the leader in planning, promoting and directing the 1877 Minnesota State Fair, which also included the Stock Breeders Association.

Again, attendance set a record. On the second day, a 20-mile horse race was held. Racing attracted the largest crowds, but livestock, poultry and agricultural product exhibits all were excellent. For the first time people rode to the fairgrounds in streetcars drawn by horses or mules on the four lines in Minneapolis.

THE IMPORTANCE of the 1877 Fair was its financial success. A profit of \$6,398 was divided equally between the Society and the Breeders Association.

When the Fair was shifted to St. Paul in 1878, the recalcitrant Colonel King was outraged. He vowed revenge and decided to hold his own fair in Minneapolis as president of the "Minnesota Agricultural and Mechanical Association."

Every day thousands of people attended each fair but Colonel King succeeded in making the Minneapolis Fair the better of the two. The number and scope of the displays were superior to those of the Fair in St. Paul. Total receipts of the Minneapolis Fair were \$30,000, which the newspapers considered "an almost fabulous sum."

In 1879 both fairs were held during the first days of September, one at the St. Paul Driving Park and the other in Minneapolis. Minneapolis men wanted to strike a fatal blow at St. Paul Fair promoters and, in many ways they succeeded. The attendance in Minneapolis easily topped St. Paul's. The Minneapolis backers had plenty of money and were liberal. The Minnesota Agricultural Society, sponsors of the St. Paul Fair, was poor and conservative.

But the most distressing factor for St. Paul backers was the people's nonchalance over whether or not the Fair was a success. Many businessmen tried to dissuade the St. Paul managers from holding a fair. They were convinced Colonel King would outclass them.

After fairs ended, Minneapolis loyalists boasted that there had been an open contest between the two rivals and that Minneapolis

had won easily with only half the effort that St. Paul had exerted.

The Fair of 1879 had left a debt of \$4,000. Rumors were rampant that the Society would cease to exist and that the Minneapolis Exposition would try to absorb the Society.

With Colonel King announcing that the Minneapolis Exposition would hold a "great Northwestern fair" in 1880, it was becoming increasingly difficult to continue to hold the State Fair in St. Paul. Therefore, the Fair was moved to Rochester. It was a success, and broke even financially, with 8,000 people passing through the turnstiles.

THE WEEK of the Fair, it rained but, amazingly, the Society broke even. Colonel King was beset with the same problem — rain. His ego was deflated when he lost \$18,000.

In 1882, Colonel King tried to outdo the Society and, from a numbers point of view, he did. His Fair attracted multitudes of people. The livestock and exhibits were large and portrayed well but no financial report was published, leading to speculation that the Fair had lost money. The articles exhibited cost the management great sums of money. Entry fees were low, privileges cheap, and thousands of free tickets were given away.

The Society's Fair at Rochester also was successful. Receipts were \$17,600.54, compared with expenditures of \$17,448.71.

In 1883, a plan to hold the State Fair on new grounds between St. Paul and Minneapolis was discussed. Colonel King and other leaders of the Minneapolis Exposition favored the plan, as did St. Paul citizens.

Yet, St. Paul citizens were skeptical of Colonel King's motives and afraid a "Midway" site would benefit Minneapolis more than St. Paul. No agreement was reached, and that year Colonel King opted for trickery. He announced he would hold no Fair. He hoped that without competition the Society would be lulled into putting on a mediocre fair. After plans for the Society's Fair at Owatonna were formed, Colonel King announced that his fair would be held one week earlier. He apparently intended to so outclass the Society's Fair that it eventually would wither and die. The exhibits and advertised products at King's fair were a success but the fair, in general, was a failure. It never was repeated.

The Society's Fair at Owatonna received mixed reactions. Exhibits of horses and cattle were good, but many came from outside the state. The livestock, racing machinery, and racing attractions were creditable. The agricultural exhibit, however, did not represent the state. The display of grains, fruits and vegetables was small and the dairy showing was poor.

IN THE SPRING of 1884 there was talk again of finding a permanent state fairgrounds between St. Paul and Minneapolis and accessible to both cities. Railroads ran out from the cities in every direction and people whose business called them to one or the other city at least once a year could time their visits in order to attend the Fair.

Only one obstacle stood in the way: where to build the site. Minneapolis was tired of its open-air exposition and wanted a permanent exhibition. St. Paul was tired of supporting fairs outside of its area. Both wanted the Fair held where they could profit and benefit from it.

Action to establish a permanent fairgrounds began with a resolution introduced by C. H. Whitney of Marshall. It asked that the Society name a committee to negotiate with the citizens of St. Paul and Minneapolis for 100 acres of land, to be used free for 50 years, if possible.

A ST. PAUL committee and members of Minneapolis' Board of Trade constituted the committee to select a site. Minneapolis members wanted to use the grounds at Minnehaha Falls. St. Paul members favored a Midway location. Ansel Oppenheim, a St. Paul committee member, said the Minnehaha Falls site was not practicable because the owners of the land would demand \$10,000 an acre.

Finally, Henry Fairchild, a member of the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, suggested that the Ramsey County Poor Farm, located on Como and Snelling Avenues, could be acquired at a reasonable price. The Minneapolis Board of Trade rejected the proposal. The St. Paul Chamber of Commerce supported the St. Paul committee's choice.

EVERYONE HELPED make the Fair a success that year. Even the animosity between Minneapolis and St. Paul seemed to diminish as all realized the permanent home of the Fair would help everyone. Attendance was 74,508.

A stalemate was the inevitable result. However, before the annual meeting of the Agricultural Society, Ramsey County Commissioner George H. Hazzard introduced a resolution providing that Ramsey County donate the Ramsey County Poor Farm to the State Agricultural Society. The adoption of this resolution was the winning play.

The Society's 1885 annual meeting was held in St. Paul on January 27 and 28. Clark W. Thompson, Society president, called for adoption of a motion by John H. Harris that the Society accept the Ramsey County Poor Farm. This was done with loud acclamation and enthusiasm. The Fair had a permanent residence at last.

Nathaniel Clarke was selected Society president. The state legislature appropriated \$100,000 for the erection of permanent fair buildings.

The first fair on the present grounds was held September 7 through 15, 1885. Architect and superintendent of construction was James Brodie of St. Paul. During the summer of 1885 a grandstand race track, a wooden domed building (the Agriculture Building) and several smaller buildings were built. The Great Northern Railroad ran a spur track into the very center of the grounds.

Today, the State Fair has become more commercialized, and much more is offered besides agriculture. The grandstand show was started in 1899. The production was built around a story or theme and included ballet dancing, thrill features and fireworks, all with dialogue and amplification. It revolutionized grandstand entertainment and was the forerunner of the present-day revues.

Gerald J. Franke, now administrative assistant of the State Agricultural Society, believes that commercialism is more dominant today but points out that agricultural interests still are dominant, and receive a good share of the \$275,000 of premiums that are awarded. The Minnesota State Fair now is the third largest in the country, and it has been so successful because of the absence of political bickering. He adds that a great percentage of those attending the fair come from areas of the state outside the Twin City area and from twelve to sixteen other states.

Even the irrepressible Colonel King would be proud.

MINNESOTA STATE AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society as a restored farm home of the mid-nineteenth century period.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society are located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society also maintains a museum office in the basement of the schoolhouse on the Gibbs Farm property. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.