



~ **Part 10** ~

**Reflections on a Common Theme  
Fairs and Chautauquas**

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## Fairs and Chautauquas

### CLOUD COUNTY

#### **A Chronology of Cloud County Fairs**

by Joan Nothern

The Republican Valley Empire reported Cloud County's first Annual Fair was held October 15-16, 1871, on Sixth Street in Concordia, "and all things considered, it was a success."

The second Annual Fair was canceled because of a bad drought and grasshopper invasion.

Things improved after that, and by 1882 attendance was between 2,000 and 3,000 enjoying first-class horse races. In 1884, the fair featured "80 of the most noted racers of the West to contest for laurels in the Speed Ring." That year, Miss Lottie St. Clair made a grand balloon ascension each day.

In spite of this promising beginning, the February 16, 1900, Concordia Blade reported, "County Fairs seem to be a thing of the past. There hasn't been a fair since 1887."

Glasco, located in the southwest corner of Cloud County, established the Glasco Stock Show in 1903. The event, complete with Ferris wheel, was held on Main Street.

In 1908, the Glasco Sun reported a September fair in Concordia and an October fair (the Glasco Stock Show) in Glasco.

Complications dogged the Concordia fair. In 1913, the Concordia Cloud County Fair Association was sued by Aviator Harris who claimed he was owed \$250 for a flight in which his plane crashed. The association maintained there was no flight because of the crash. The district court ruled against the association.

On August 25, 1913, the Blade Empire printed the first announcement of the Cloud County Fair annual event at Glasco. Building on the successful Glasco Stock Show, the Cloud County Fair enjoyed a long, stable run in Glasco, remaining there for over 70 years. The opening parade, horse shows, carnival, exhibits and events were supported by committed local workers.

In 1964 the voters of Cloud County passed a proposition to build a Cloud County Fair Building in Glasco. It was built on the fairgrounds in northwest Glasco, adding to the facilities that accommodated the fair: the Youth Building and the stock ring.

In 1987, the Cloud County Fair returned to Concordia, with new Cloud County Fairgrounds, and all structures, except the Youth Building, moved to Concordia. Additional buildings were constructed for the 4-H food stand, livestock and exhibit facilities. For 25 years, Concordia has found county fairs are very much of the present!

Meanwhile, Glasco, after 84 years of an annual fair, introduced Glasco Fun Day. The first Saturday in October, a new fall tradition, with parade, trap shoot, fun run, car show, and events on Main Street and in the City Park, fills the community with fair fever.

### MITCHELL COUNTY

#### **Chautauqua Park-Beloit**

by Carldon Broadbent

L. D. Williams, who came to Willow Springs (Beloit) in the early 1870s, had the foresight and determination to establish a city park and fair-grounds for the many settlers coming to the town. First, a bridge had to be built across the Solomon to connect the town to land in the bend of the

river which contained 25 acres that the city voted to buy for \$3000. In 1872 the city contracted \$10,000 to the Kingridge Company for a 200-foot iron bridge. It was completed in 1873.

The biggest demand for the Williams Park came in March 1902 when the Northwest Kansas Methodist Epworth League voted to hold their state conference for the next ten years in Beloit at the Williams Park. By 1904 the Epworth Chautauqua Assembly was one of the largest Chautauquas in the Midwest.

The Chautauqua movement, started on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in the western part of New York State, begun about 1874, the adult education programs of the Chautauqua Institution. Their program spread throughout the country, becoming the leading cultural event in towns across the nation.

One of the first buildings constructed at the Beloit park was the large octagonal auditorium that seated close to 3000 persons and cost \$5000. Other buildings were the Club House and the floral and arts building located south of the Club House. There were water wells drilled and electricity to light the entire park.

In addition to the summer Chautauqua events which lasted several weeks, the Mitchell County fair was held in September each year. In 1924 the rural school graduation was held in the Chautauqua auditorium.

The 1904 Chautauqua was held in July for ten days. Many families camped out the entire time on the grounds. So the park was set up with eighteen streets and alleys making 268 lots on which to pitch tents. In that year Beloit city more than doubled in size. There was a post office, general store, bookstore, large dining hall, 25 outhouses, livery stable, and dozens of tents selling their own wares. The Dining Hall was put in the Beloit Club House and the kitchen had five hand pump gas stoves.

Each morning at 8 o'clock began with prayer and ended at 8 p.m. with concerts. The program the entire time consisted of Christian work, women's work, Preachers' Congress, Epworth League interests, missions, clubs for the youth, which included sports and games, music, and choruses, and instruction in music and elocution.

Entertainment came from all over the United States. The performers either sang, recited poetry, played instruments, or lectured. William Jennings Bryan, the orator and presidential candidate. was a popular attraction when he lectured in Beloit.

Radio, movies, and other attractions came to push aside the need for the Chautauqua movement, but the park in the bend of the Solomon River and the buildings built there continued to be used for many years. Each fall the fair was held there. Horse races, family picnics, and other events were held on that beautiful site. In 1937 a state of the art swimming pool was opened. In recent years, Christmas displays are erected throughout the acreage so visitors in automobiles can slowly drive around the bend viewing Christmas themes at the Chautauqua Isle of Lights. This year on Memorial Day, 2012, the park was filled with homecoming classes visiting and buying lunches. The newly completed swimming pool and water park opened on that day also. Beloit's Chautauqua Park is the place to enjoy summer. Come and cool off in our tree shaded beautiful

## **Chautauqua Park, Cawker City's Lincoln Park**

by Steve Richardson

In 1870, William Belk and his wife Margaret homesteaded the land which included a grove of oak trees along the banks of the Oak Creek. In the summer of 1882, Colonel W. C. Whitney made arrangements to lease the land, which had become known as Belk's Grove, and make it available as "a public pleasure resort." The land was cleared of brush and otherwise made ready for the first annual 4th of July celebration. Colonel Whitney chose the name Lincoln Park in honor of Abraham Lincoln.

The following summer (June 5-6, 1883) over 300 soldiers attended the "Grand Reunion of Veteran Soldiers and Sailors of Northwest Kansas." However, talk of using the grounds for an annual Chautauqua did not begin until 1896. The Ministerial Association of the Methodist Church organized "The Beloit District Camp Meeting Association" that year and applied for a state Charter. In 1897 and 1898, the association held camp meetings at Lincoln Park which were conducted on the plan of the Ottawa Chautauqua.

During August 9-16, 1899, the first Epworth League Assembly was presented at Lincoln Park, which was then followed by the local camp meeting. The Assembly charged admission to its events

to defray the cost of procuring noted speakers and lecturers. The regular camp meeting followed and relied on local volunteers and local talent.

The success of the first Assembly and camp meeting was greatly surpassed the following year when the program was extended to 10 days and over \$1,800 of expenses were easily covered by the admission receipts. The attendance swelled in 1901 when William Jennings Bryan spoke on "A Conquering Nation" and added a decidedly political tone to the event. Governor Stanley spoke the following day and respected the religious precepts of the Assembly. In 1902 the first moving pictures were shown which included "The Passion Play." A gasoline engine was procured to pump water for the estimated 3,000 campers.

In 1903, the Belks agreed to sell 30 acres, at \$100 per acre, to the Lincoln Park Association to ensure the future of the park as a public gathering place. Payment was spread over three years and the Association sold lots for camping and stock in the organization to raise the necessary funds. With clear title to the land, permanent improvements could be made to the park.

The Lincoln Park Chautauqua was created to provide a sanctuary for worship, education, rest, recreation, and amusement. It was conceived as an intellectual gathering place for the exchange of ideas and talents. One could hear a noted evangelist, listen to lectures on religious, scientific, humanitarian, and practical themes; learn to draw, paint, or use water colors, weave baskets or create ceramics; sing in a choir, hear band concerts or listen to a virtuoso soloist; play basketball or tennis, or participate in the regional baseball championship; see a magician or a moving picture. The park had trails for hiking, a suspension bridge, and a fountain that spouted water 23 feet into the air. The creek was dammed up and a sternwheeler boated 40 passengers a mile upstream and back for 25 cents.

The 1906 Chautauqua was another milestone year. Booker T. Washington was the featured speaker. The W. C. T. U. building was dedicated as the "Lillian Stevens Hall." Two-story porches on three sides of the building were added the following year. For attendance, 1907 was the banner year with an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 attendees. The Federation of Women's Clubs dedicated their Rest Cottage that year too. Baths at the Cottage cost 25 cents. With the completion of the Cawker City Electric Light and Power Company, 100 lights were installed in 1908 to illuminate the campsite. In 1910, photography classes were added to the program.

The automobile was gaining in popularity as the preferred means of transportation as early as 1909 when it became increasingly difficult to find someone to operate the feed barn at the park. Some 7 to 10 cars were used by a group of 40 to 50 people, divided into four teams, to make a day's journey to the surrounding communities to advertise the Lincoln Park Chautauqua by distributing thousands of circulars and window cards, and 4,000 program booklets were distributed as well.

The success of the Lincoln Park Chautauqua ultimately led to its demise. In 1910, the International Lyceum Bureau decided to establish three competing "Chautauquas" within the draw of Lincoln Park. A further blow was dealt the following year, when a flash flood along Oak Creek temporarily interrupted the scheduled Chautauqua program. The ensuing confusion scared off traveling campers who were given false information about the condition of the park and were told that the remaining programs had been canceled. Attendance slumped in 1912 too.

The end of the Lincoln Park Chautauqua came in 1913 when an interest payment on the mortgage was late. The land was sold at public auction but was bought by G. W. Dockstader for \$2,050. Dockstader proceeded to give the park to the trustees of a newly-formed association of Protestant churches from the 8 surrounding counties: Phillips, Rooks, Smith, Osborne, Jewell, Mitchell, Republic, and Cloud. The Lincoln Park Religious and Educational Association coordinated an annual assembly at the park the following year. Attendance was modest and no further assemblies materialized.

However, the park was maintained over the years for public use. During WW II, it was used as a place to house detained German prisoners of war. The Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts used the park frequently over the ensuing years. About 1966, the park was acquired by the State of Kansas as part of the proposed Waconda Lake Reservoir. Waconda Springs and the pioneer history of the Solomon Valley were bulldozed into oblivion as construction began on Glen Elder Dam. Dedicated in June 1970, the waters of Waconda Lake did not reach Lincoln Park. The final indignity occurred in 1993 with the great floods along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. Water was held back that year, and for the first time since its construction, water was released from the spillway near Glen Elder. The legendary old oak trees of Lincoln Park were submerged in several feet of water for weeks on end. Not a single tree survived the inundation.

## **OSBORNE COUNTY**

### **Osborne County Fair**

by Carolyn Williams

Osborne County has had a county fair ever since there was such a thing. Today it is a bit different. Gone are the days of the Ferris wheels, loop-de-loops, fortune tellers, all those you can get at Kansas City's Worlds of Fun. Osborne County, like most other counties, has much more than glitz 'n' glamour. There's real "down home" kinds of things, such as the Quilt display sponsored by the Solomon Valley Quilt Guild which meets monthly in Downs. There are art displays from the Summer Recreation program, photo competition, booths of all kinds advertising various venues. The very most important exhibits are those of the county 4-Hers who exhibit everything from woodworking to horses, handicrafts to cats 'n' dogs.

This year the fair will be held July 25-29, Wednesday-Sunday. The fair parade is scheduled for Friday night, July 27. Traditionally the local VFW Auxiliary will serve their luscious Chuck wagon dinner featuring country-fried chicken and ham with all the trimmings. This is held right on Main Street at the VFW building, so if the evening is as hot as last year's evening, spectators can view the parade from air conditioned comfort.

A new feature this year is the addition to an existing building where the open class exhibits have been held. The 4-Hers and community-minded people and organization in the county have all been raising funds for this new addition which will feature new restrooms with showers; a full kitchen and dining area. These features will take the place of the two outdated lunch stand and restrooms which Osborne County residents have endured for quite a number of years. Plans are to demolish the old lunch stand, which is an icon in Osborne County, but what do you do with such a building?

The \$200,000 project is well underway with \$117,000 in hand. The fundraising began with \$50,000 from the local 4-H council, grants from Sarver & McFadden Charitable Trusts of \$30,000, and fund-raisers in the form of Sunday dinners held by the local 4-Hers themselves. One event profited almost \$3,000.

Features of this year's fair are still being finalized but the traditional parade on Friday eve, the Chuck wagon, car races and Ranch Rodeo at the grandstand are almost surely standard fare. The livestock auction where local 4-Hers sell their prize cattle or hogs is always a bitter-sweet time. When a young person chooses, coddles, feeds, and shows his/her animal and then is expected to SELL IT, that's almost too much. It's only when the check is in hand that he/she realizes the reward for all that care.

Fairs aren't only about exhibiting, competing and winning prizes, it's more about the life skills that these events engender in the young adults who will one day be the voting and decision-making adults of tomorrow. The 4-H pledge says it better than anything, "I pledge by heart to greater loyalty . . . to make the best better."

## **ROOKS COUNTY**

### **Rooks County Free Fair**

by Roger Hrabe

The Rooks County Free Fair completed its 132nd year in 2011 and is one of the longest-running county fairs in the state of Kansas. The "Fair of Champions," as it has become known, has always been held in Stockton and is the county's premier yearly event.

The first county fair in Rooks County was held in October 1879 on rented land east of Stockton. L. C. Smith was the fair president and Lloyd Selby was the secretary of the fair at that time. An 80-foot building was erected to show samples of the husbandman's skills in 1884.

In 1886, due to lack of interest, the Plainville Agricultural Fair Association was organized and a fair was held in Plainville in October.

On September 2, 1887, the Rooks County Record reported: "The natural place to hold a county fair is in the county seat town, and yet Stockton sits with folded hands and Plainville has the honor of holding the only fair in Rooks County." The Rooks County Agricultural Society then reorganized and became a corporation with a charter granted under Kansas law.

In 1890, a severe drought struck western Kansas and made the fair impossible due to crop failures. No fairs were held in 1891, 1892, 1893, and 1894, though rains came in August 1894. It should also be noted that no fair was held in 1917 due to World War I.

The fair moved in 1896 because of a hog farm being too close to the grounds. The present 53.5-acre site was purchased in 1896, and later added onto in 1915, 1935, and 1970.

The original grandstand could only hold 500 spectators and stalls for 30 horses. Because of a fire, a new grandstand was dedicated in 1937 that would hold 3500 spectators along with the new horse and livestock barns. Each of these WPA structures, along with McCaslin Hall, was built of native limestone from the hills south of town. These buildings are still in use today.

Some of the grandstand performances by top name performers that draw large crowds every year include Martina McBride, Montgomery Gentry, Chris LeDoux, and Taylor Swift, to name a few. The stock car and motorcycle races are attractions that entice many from near and far to come and see. The roar from these races can be heard all over the city.

The area 4-H Clubs and FFA organizations continue to make their presence felt in the exhibits displayed at the county fair. The livestock judging and other exhibit judging always attract a lot of attention from the youth as well as the adults.

Rooks County Free Fair continues to be the place to be in August of every year.

## **GRAHAM COUNTY**

### **Graham County Fair**

by Alan LeSage

Numerous residents gathered in the storeroom of T. T. Duncalf on August 7, 1886, for the purpose of organizing an Agricultural & Horticultural Society for Graham County. Several speeches were made by leading farmers and it was agreed the Society should be organized. W. R. Hill (founder of Hill City) was appointed the temporary chairman. Graham County only had nine townships, and three representative farmers from each township were elected to the board. The board elected Colonel Randolph Burt as the society's first president. Plans were made to sell 1,000 shares of capital stock at \$10.00 each and procure suitable grounds. Articles of Incorporation were completed and filed with the Secretary of State in Topeka on August 16, 1886. These articles stated the name shall be "the Ag. & Hort. Association of Graham County, Kansas" organized for the purpose of purchasing and laying out a fair ground and advancing the Agricultural and Horticultural interests of Graham County and this corporation shall exist for a period of 50 years. The fair was held October 21-23, 1886, at the fairgrounds located on the north edge of Hill City, one mile north of the current Hwy 24 & Hwy 283 intersection, with 1500 people attending on the third day.

Awards were given for best agricultural categories which included draft horses, driving horses, driving teams, jacks, and mules. Some of the horticultural categories included a peck of potatoes, peck of sweet potatoes, peck of wheat, peck of oats, largest squash, largest pumpkin, and collection of turnips. There were also prizes for the best bee hive and best washing machine. Activities and entertainment were pony races, trotting races, mule races, and various other horse races, one with a special purse of \$1,500.00.

On September 5-7, 1940, a Pioneer Days Celebration was held honoring the 60th anniversary of Graham County. It included a parade, band concert, speakers, kids' rodeo, and baseball games. Mrs. C. Serena of Bogue was recognized for living in Graham County the longest, 71 years.

In 1952 the present Graham County Fair Association was created as a nonprofit organization which met the requirements of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture as a fair association. The association received a tax levy for premiums and awards for exhibitors and contestants, and to purchase grounds, erect buildings, and for maintenance. On February 7, 1953, the association acquired 22 acres on the south edge of Hill City from the A. J. Rice Estate, where the current fairgrounds is located. In the next few years an exhibit building and two livestock buildings were built and floodlights were added to the rodeo arena. A 4-H exhibit building was added in 1969.

### **Nicodemus Annual Emancipation/Homecoming Celebration**

by Sharyn Dowdell

Each year the Nicodemus Emancipation/Homecoming Celebration, the last weekend in July, draws hundreds of people to this historic little jewel in the Solomon Valley. People come from all over our nation to celebrate the history, enjoy the fellowship and participate in this unique weekend.

The first Celebration was held in 1878—just one year after ex-slaves from Kentucky came to the plains of Kansas to establish their own town and township. Nicodemus became a National Historic Site and part of the National Park System in 1996. The rich history of this town and this traditional event are experiences not to be missed. The three-day Homecoming event includes entertainment for all ages. Highlights over the years have been the parade on Saturday morning, vintage baseball game on Saturday afternoon, and dances on Friday and Saturday nights. Our park site is filled with vendors selling food, souvenirs, clothing, and many other items. The University of Kansas provides free medical screenings each year.

The Saturday afternoon program features notable speakers and a fashion/talent show. Saturday evening always is host to a gospel extravaganza where the audience enjoys hearing renditions of music from locals and visitors. The huge fireworks display Saturday night is a spectacular sight.

Sunday is church day and always draws a large crowd to the First Baptist Church. The event ends with a fellowship dinner Sunday after church before everyone returns to their distant homes. Be sure to put the dates (July 26-28, 2012) on your schedule of things to do this summer. Contact Sharyn Dowdell, Event Coordinator, at 785-839-4475 for more information.

## **SHERIDAN COUNTY**

### **A Fair to Remember**

by Bette James

Suppose you wanted to tell a story about a carnival, a very special and long-running carnival in a very small town. How could you tell such a big 32-year story in such a small space?

You could tell about three guys from Sheridan County going to Peoria, Illinois, in 1980 to buy five very used carnival rides—race cars and sky fighter airplanes and a train for small children, and a Ferris wheel and roller coaster for the rest of us—and how Hoxie has just the right Shade Tree Mechanics to restore all of them to perfectly safe condition and to keep them running all these years. You could even talk about adding rides to a total of ten today.

Or you could tell the story of the brick walk and the patio, which were built brick by brick as the town bought family mementos to raise the funds for a new concession stand (which now has not just food but good food); or you could mention the grassy grounds and the landscaping created by the gardeners of the community, who water and maintain everything to keep a clean, beautiful setting.

Or, if you love carousels, you could tell the story of a carousel in such bad condition that its restoration required not only mechanical repair, but restoration of its beauty as well, so that all the body shops in town shared in prepping the base coats and repairing ears and tails, while talented artists vied for the privilege of repainting and decorating the horses. Competition for Most Beautiful Horse was fierce until one jewel-bedecked princess of a filly showed up and became the obvious winner! Now the carousel has its own octagon building to keep the refurbishing pristine.

The games would actually make another story, one that tells of all the community organizations operating the games each year, with a truckload of prizes, from stuffed toys to goldfish, going out to the many winners, and with volunteers working the booths.

Speaking of prizes, you could make quite a story of Mike's Toy Chest, a large storage building that houses the semi-load of prizes and is named for our Mike, a worker whose memorial honors the work he loved to do.

And speaking of memorials, you could tell the story of how the park-like grounds of the carnival are graced with many benches and tables that were purchased with memorial funds given to the Sheridan Amusement Company through the years, replacing old backless benches scrounged from a defunct bowling alley. Now the grandmas and grandpas relax in comfort while the children choose their pleasures among rides and games.

Then there is the Melodrama—a riotous production put on each year by local thespians, who bring their talents nightly to a midway tent show, which soon will have better accommodations.

Or you could just tell the story of all the volunteers—more than 300 of them working several shifts per person, so that all money goes into Sheridan Amusement Company for improvements and for

scholarships. The carnival can't expand much now because the pool of volunteers is pretty much maxed out with the rides, games, and concessions on the grounds. But SAC can do a lot of good with the income derived from "The Hoxie Fair."

The effect of the fair and carnival on the whole community would make a good story, too. The town's population will about triple this year, July 26-28, as it does every year, with family reunions, class reunions, and city visitors filling the fair grounds, the stands at the rodeo, and the carnival midway nightly—not to mention filling nearly every house in the county. Friends have been known to come from as far as Arizona to volunteer in honor of a young man we lost too young.

The Sheridan County Fair brings us together and touches our hearts, and it's all done by folks who care. That may be the only story that counts.