

COMAL COUNTY FAIR

CONTEXT:

“Around the world today there are county fairs, regional fairs, state fairs, U.S., and world fairs (expositions) . . . The common denominators of all these types of fairs are people, entertainment, education, and celebration.” This description from *It’s Fair Time, History of the Comal County Fair*, sums up the value of the gathering called the fair. The annual Comal County Fair in New Braunfels, Texas, has a rich history dating back to 1892 and over the years has evolved into one of the largest county fairs in Texas. The Comal County Fair emphasizes agriculture, animal husbandry, home economic skills, arts, entertainment, as well as promoting local industry. Horse racing was once a popular event and the rodeo and carnival continue to provide entertainment. The fair is one of those generational traditions that become part of childhood, part of growing up and part of old age. Bands provide an avenue for entertainment and many of the entertainers are local talent. Food booths supply a pleasant aroma and good food, while providing income for local organizations. Volunteers are everywhere as well as exhibitors. The Friday morning parade conjures up memories of horses, pooper-scoopers (for the horses), rousing patriotic music, country music, lots of floats, performers, and children. From the 1976 Souvenir Fair Program, comes this observation: “Without question it is one of the last activities where the entire family can go participate, and there is something for everyone to see and enjoy.” The Comal County Fair is held each year in September at the Comal County Fairgrounds at 701 E. Common Street in New Braunfels, Comal County, Texas (PHOTO COLLAGE #1).

OVERVIEW:

HISTORY OF THE FAIR AND THE FAIR GROUNDS:

The Comal County Fair can trace its roots back to the late 1800s. An article in the *Neu Braunfelser Zeitung* in 1892 stated, “The citizens of Fredericksburg, in cooperation with the people from Gillespie County have for several years held a successful fair, and Lockhart, the county seat of Caldwell County, will hold its first fair this fall. That a fair in New Braunfels would be successful could be assured, because the railroads have agreed to run special trains from San Antonio and Austin to bring trainloads of visitors to the fair.”

Just three months later, an opportunity to hold a fair was presented. The city hospital, called the Krankenhaus (German for hospital), was to hold its dedication and fund-raiser on September 30, October 1 and 2. The Krankenhaus was located on the corner of Zink and Seguin Avenues and the fair was to take place on its grounds. Funds made at the fair were to be turned over to the Krankenhaus. The success of this fair contributed to the idea of forming a fair association. So on January 4, 1893, the Comal County Fair Association was organized at a public meeting in the courthouse with authorized capital of \$10,000 to be raised by selling shares to the public. Prominent businessman Harry Landa was elected president. The association set the first Fair for November 1893, to be held on Harry Landa’s property (the LCRA or Landmark building located on Landa Street was Landa’s pasture). Ironically, due to drought conditions, the fair was cancelled that first year and rescheduled the following year (1894) at the same location. For the next four years, the fair was held on Landa’s pasture.

On December 19, 1898, the Comal County Fair Association purchased eleven acres on the Guadalupe River in Comaltown (an area of New Braunfels) for \$825 (PHOTO #2). A month later, adjoining acres were purchased. One hundred fifty citizens purchased 600 shares at \$2.00 a share for a total of \$1,200 to provide funding. The land was cleared and a track was laid out for racing plus a 40x60 foot dance floor was built (PHOTO #3). A newspaper reporter in 1902 reported that the association was in good financial shape, but within three years, the association found itself in financial trouble. This led to a decision to sell their property to the City of New Braunfels for \$1,000, which occurred in July of 1905. However, the sale included a provision that the Fair Association could use the land for 50 years. Although the 50 years has long passed and most of the property still belongs to the City of New Braunfels, the fair is still taking place on the same grounds.

By 1908 and 1909, the fair was once again financially sound. Then from 1910 until 1922 there was no mention in the newspapers of a fair happening and the City was using the property as a dumping ground.

After several years without a fair in New Braunfels, a group of civic-minded citizens revived the idea of an annual fair. The Comal County Fair Association was re-organized in 1923 into a corporation, with shares selling for \$10 each. To compensate for the land lost to the city landfill, the organization purchased three blocks of property from owners of lots in the Braunfels subdivision adjacent to the fairgrounds (PHOTO #4). The price was \$7,762. Then tragedy, unexpectedly, the grandstand burned to the ground right before the fair, and the directors found themselves with a \$10,000 improvement debt. Fortunately the organization had taken out insurance for rain damage because on the second and third day, the fair was rained out. In the end, the insurance paid \$5,000 and ticket sales amounted to another \$5,000, putting the fair in good shape financially.

For ten years, a successful fair was held. Then came the Great Depression and the fair ended up with a \$2,500 deficit at the end of 1931. The fair continued another year, made some drastic changes, and came out a mere \$150 ahead in 1932. In 1933, the fair was symbolic of a return to better times in Comal County and real beer.

In 1964, the Fair Association declared itself a nonprofit organization, dissolving the 1923 corporation.

REFLECTION OF THE TIMES:

There have been many changes in the Comal County Fair reflecting what was happening locally, nationally and around the world. The lack of mention of a fair from 1911-1922 was probably due to World War I. In 1932, there were changes due to the Great Depression. Expenses were streamlined, there would be no queen's contest, no cash prizes and entry ticket prices were lowered. Volunteers were not paid and commercialism was avoided, while home talent was utilized in the rodeo and with the musicians. This started the advent of free passes for exhibitors to encourage attendance and enhance exhibits. That tradition has been carried forward to this day (2013).

In September 29, 1933, the statement appeared in the *New Braunfels Herald*: "The fair was symbolic of a return to better times in Comal County and under the National Recovery Act banner heralded by our new administration, the return of real beer." During Prohibition,

“Busto,” the legal “near beer” just was not the same as the real thing. The end of Prohibition signaled the return to the “good ol’ days” when every fest featured social beer drinking in New Braunfels.

Beginning in 1941, and for a while during World War II, the fairs were scaled down, as there was not much time for entertainment or money to spend. In 1946, once again a full-sized fair called the Centennial Fair took place. Although 1945 was the centennial year for the founding of New Braunfels, the celebration was delayed until 1946, because of the war. Of course, the 1946 Centennial Fair not only celebrated the Centennial of the founding of New Braunfels, it also celebrated the end of the war. In the October 11, 1946, *New Braunfels Herald* this description of the fair appeared: “A carefree get-together . . . friendly competition in everything from cake-baking to livestock breeding . . . a chance to study new methods in homemaking and see the latest in farm machinery . . . fun from the Ferris wheel to harness races. Our County Fairs represent a happy combination of play and the serious business of living that is America at its best.” The post war economy was prospering and this led to the “bigger and better” philosophy for the fair. Crowds were big and money was available for entertainment.

Although the late 40s and 50s were times of great strife in America due to world conflicts these same years were times of continued post-war economic prosperity. The strengthened American economy and automation led to more money and a boost to the fair. In 1952, after recent floods, the fairgrounds were sprayed with disinfectant. The polio vaccine had not been discovered at that time and lack of knowledge of how polio was spread led to this move. Floods as well as drought have always played a part in fair events and in 1954 the Guadalupe and Comal Rivers nearly dried up. Dust was an issue as well as lack of agricultural entries due to the drought.

After the 9-11-2001 terrorist attacks, floats and costumes were steeped in patriotism. “God Bless the USA” signs were everywhere, but military flyovers were cancelled that year. The *Herald-Zeitung*’s Doug Toney remarked in his editorial, “Take a good look at our future today. These young people are carrying on the traditions and skills of this country’s way of life.” Over the 120 year since the first fair, adjustments have been made to the fair by changing exhibits, lowering and raising prices, scaling back and then making everything “bigger and better” than it was the year before. Many of these decisions were based on the times.

ALL ABOUT THE PEOPLE:

The fair has always been about people. In 1894, there were contests for the most popular man, most modest man, heaviest man, largest foot, smallest foot, tallest girl, prettiest girl, most popular girl, oldest couple at the Fair, best-looking baby, longest hair, longest beard, and even ugliest man in Comal County. Beginning in 1908, stores closed at noon on the Friday of the fair and the day was designated as New Braunfels Independent School District Fair Day with school out all day and children admitted free. The tradition of everyone going to the Friday morning parade and then to the fair has been around for a long time. Contests have always been important from different categories of parade entries, to ribbons for best agriculture entry and best costumes of adults and children.

The first official queens contest was in 1928, with Alvina Vogel crowned Queen of the Harvest Festival (PHOTO #5). Serious young ladies sold tickets that represented votes in the

contest. The queen rode with her court on the fair float in the parade. Due to the Great Depression, the 1931 Fair Queen Contest was the last until 1967 (PHOTO #6). Before 1966, float participants were chosen at random by fair directors, however, in 1967, the first Fair Queen chosen by judges was instituted. Jacque Sahn was the first queen and would reign over the Fair and other activities throughout the year, which included riding on the fair float when it traveled to other city parades (PHOTO #7). Bobbie Specht was chosen as the first Rodeo Queen in 1965 (PHOTO #8). The Fair Queen and Rodeo Queen contests continue to be important aspects of the fair (2013) (PHOTO COLLAGE #9).

EXHIBITS:

The year was 1894, and the grounds were covered with white tents filled to overflowing where fruits of the field, garden and orchard, were displayed. The main tent was devoted to articles of local industry and agriculture. Livestock exhibits were under a nearby shady oak area. Prizes were awarded for the best bale of cotton, bushel of corn, oats, molasses, pears, corn meal, wheat flour, garden vegetables, butter, needlecraft, cakes, breads, dairy products, preserves, flowers, artwork, best stallion, poultry, shorthorn steer, and spans of horses, pigs, and cattle. In 1908, awards were given for best oats, corn, sweet potatoes, pecans, honey, home-made wine, feed, flowers, fruit, vegetables, molasses, preserves, bread, cakes, pickled vegetables, handmade ladies underwear, men's suits and lots of items made by children. All livestock exhibits and shows were temporarily eliminated in 1948, due to cases of anthrax in Comal County. More emphasis would be on playing bingo that year. Organizations became involved in exhibits beginning in 1957. The 4H Club and the Home Demonstration Agency had style shows and the Game Warden initiated the Wild Fowl Exhibit. The Baby Barnyard Exhibit opened in the 1960s, with baby chicks, goats, and calves for children to pet and view and the Wildlife Exhibit sponsored by the Comal County Sportsman's Club. In the 90s the Tractor Exhibits, Tractor Pulls and Kiddie Tractor Pulls became very popular. Exhibits, exhibitors, and exhibit halls have always been an important part of the fair and they changed with the times and reflected what was happening in the home and field (PHOTO COLLAGE #10).

INDUSTRY, TECHNOLOGY AND THE ECONOMY:

In 1894, Davis sewing machines were displayed in the Voelcker Bros. Furniture tent, Mrs. Sklenar had a tent of fine millinery, and Ed Gruene displayed musical instruments. The newest designs of Studebaker wagons and buggies, South Bend chilled plows, cultivators and the new Cassidy Sulky were introduced. F. Scholl & Bros. displayed Aeromotor windmills. From the beginning, the fair provided an opportunity for businesses to display the newest and most innovative products on the market. The displays changed with advances in technology and boosted the economy. The exhibits in 1908 included products from Dittlinger Industries, grave adornments by New Braunfels Concrete Works, N. Holz & Sons carriages, buggies, wagons and plows, J. Jahn furniture, and a collection of stuffed birds and butterflies from the Bird Saloon. In 1909, J. Jahn displayed bedsprings and participants were weighed. The couple guessing their closest combined weight, won a bedspring. Other displays included agricultural implements from Bartels, Sands & Co., Gus Tolle's collars, Ernest Heidemeyer's saddles and harnesses, Comal Springs Nursery gardening, Klenke photography, Professor Ed Gruene's pianos, jeweler

Jos. Roth's cut glass, silverware and jewelry and St. John Bottling Works displayed different drinks.

In 1923, an outstanding exhibit was combined by Pfeuffer Lumber Company, J. Jahn Furniture Company, and S.V. Pfeuffer Co. The booth was built from lumber, furnished with furniture and had clothing, toilet articles and kitchen furniture. It was a miniature three room house. There was also a Henne Lumber display and the latest records on the Edison in the Sippel Phonograph Co. booth. The 1927 displays reflected change in technology with demonstrations of electric appliances such as Kelvinator refrigerators and Westinghouse refrigerators. "Chili" Charley and Miss Gloria, his prize demonstrator, were there with Gebhardt Chili Products (originally from New Braunfels), along with Willys-Knight, Overland, Dodge, Nash, and Ford automobiles. The Planters and Merchants Mills advertised themselves as the only gingham mill in Texas. Locke Nursery, Miss Benningfield's Style Shop, Linnartz Floral, Landa Industries, and the Boy Scouts of America.

During World War II, automobiles were hard to buy so in 1946, the automobiles were the most popular exhibit with all the dealers eager to show their new models. One of them was the 1946 Kaiser-Frazer.

Farm implements are still demonstrated at the fair and many of the once popular business booths have been replaced by local organization exhibits. Food booths, manned by many of these organizations provide fund-raising opportunities. The focus on tourism boosting the economy by visitors to the fair continues to be significant throughout the community (PHOTO COLLAGE #11).

CARNIVAL:

What fair would be complete without a carnival? The 1908 carnival boasted a foot-powered Hobby Horse where young men ran around on the roof to make the attraction spin. In 1923, the J. George Loos Carnival arrived on the train with 25 double cars of amusements. This carnival was called the "Pleasure Trail" with 29 clean and classy shows and six large riding galleries. After World War II, in 1946, the Greater United Shows Carnival had a Merry-Go-Round, Caterpillar, Tilt-A-Whirl, Mix-Up, Ferris Wheel, Miniature Auto, Miniature Airplane, and the Spitfire. The carnival continued and in 1981, the Ralph Wagner Shows Carnival had played the Comal County Fair for 18 years. The carnival now begins on Tuesday as "suicide night," coined by youngsters anxious to try out the rides, but a little skeptical about the safety on the first day after set-up. Their skepticism makes the rides even more thrilling (PHOTO COLLAGE #12).

ENTERTAINMENT:

It is recorded that in 1894, there were 3p.m., Saturday concerts. In 1908, after being idle for several years, the revitalized Fair had The Gentry Bros performances with trained horses, herds of performing camels and elephants, clowns with 600 men, women, children, and animals performing.

There is a lot of information available from the 1920s regarding entertainment. For example, in 1925, performers included the Chicago Hart's Ladies Band, the Shriner Bands, and the DeMolay Band. There was dancing, vaudeville, fireworks, tent pitching contests, relay races,

tug-of-war, and the standing jump. The 1926 Spanish Fiesta Pageant boasted 300 participants with music and dancing. Also performed that year was the play, "History of New Braunfels", complete with Prince Solms and a cast of 300 schoolchildren. In 1927, the "Gypsy Rover" was performed complete with fireworks, rockets, and cannons firing. Bands in 1929 included the Southwest Texas Teachers College Band, American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps, and two New Braunfels Bands.

In 1931, despite the Great Depression nationwide, entertainment included a New Braunfels Fire Department hose-laying contest with neighboring cities participating. Victoria, Texas, won the \$75 first prize. Following the hose race there was a football game at the Fairgrounds between the New Braunfels Unicorns and the Los Angeles Heights High School from San Antonio. The 1932 football game would be between the New Braunfels Unicorns and Lockhart High School, the latter arriving on the train. There was also a polo game between the Fischer Store team and the New Braunfels team (PHOTO #13).

With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, dances started again and the Heidelberg Orchestra played old German tunes. Also the New Braunfels football team played Yoakum High School and the girls' baseball team, the Dittlinger Maids, played the San Marcos Girls. Wild cow milking was an attraction. In 1934, New Braunfels played Kerrville Tivy High School and the New Braunfels Dittlinger Millers baseball team defeated the El Gallo team from Laredo and Monterrey.

The Night in Old New Braunfels began in the Beergarden in 1962 with entertainers such as the 36th Division National Guard Band, Shiner Hobo Band, the Polkatiers, Tall Texans, Rusty Ruppel and the Rebels, and Cookie and the Hi Fi's (PHOTO COLLAGE #14). The outdoor Beergarden called the Comal Corral open-air, dance slab, has been important providing concerts by Canyon High School, Smithson Valley High School and New Braunfels High School bands as well as the middle school bands throughout the years (PHOTO COLLAGE #15).

A highlight in 1974 was the performance of Tanya Tucker, age 14, accompanied by Dale McBride, where Tanya sang "Delta Dawn" and "What's Your Mama's Name?", and in the 80's and 90's everyone was dancing the "Cotton Eyed Joe" and the "Chicken Dance" performed by Mogen David and the Grapes of Wrath, a local band that was very popular (PHOTO #16).

Bob Warnecke recalls: "One of my fondest memories occurred in the late 70's. I was a new young fair director on the entertainment committee with chairman Kenneth " Mac" McCracken. We hired a young and up and coming country and western singer named George Strait for I believe \$200. He had become popular playing the local dance halls like Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos, the Crystal Chandelier and Gruene Hall in New Braunfels. He was accompanied by Clay Blaker and " The Ace In The Hole Band".

RACING:

Racing at the Fair began in 1894, with harness racing. This took place on Landa's pasture. By 1908, there were horse races, automobile races (automobiles such as the Ohio and Hupmobile), motorcycle races, and bicycle races. The 1923 races included harness and cow pony for Comal County residents and separate races for faster horses (PHOTO #17). In 1929 there were 125 horses racing, however, in 1937, betting was outlawed on races in Texas. Betting became an out-of-sight activity for 50 years. In 1946, after World War II, horse racing returned

after a long absence and there were so many entries that the racing chairman was looking for barns for all of the horses. Changes were coming as pari-mutuel betting in Texas was legalized in 1987, but only on state designated tracks. The Comal County Fair Association applied for a small track permit but was turned down because of the size and condition of the track. State officials let it be known that there would be no more “friendly gambling” at small town tracks. The last horserace in New Braunfels was in 1990 (PHOTO COLLAGE #18).

RODEO:

The rodeo was active from the beginning. It was reported that in 1894, awards were given for best mustang rider and cowboy roper. The Keys Bros. Rodeo was held all three days in 1927, with calf roping with prizes such as a silver-appointed saddle from Roth Jeweler. The 1960s rodeo was spectacular featuring Leon Adams riding a Brahma bull through a fire hoop. Other events were bareback riding, calf tie-down roping, steer dogging, saddle bronc riding, girls' barrel racing, and bull riding. When horse racing was cancelled in the 90s, the Rodeo expanded and in 1997, boasted 300 cowboys, 50 bull riders and attracted contestants from 40 states. The fair marked the millennium with a rodeo extravaganza featuring cash prizes totaling \$10,000 but the allure is more than the money. It is an adrenaline rush for the contestants and also the audience (PHOTO COLLAGE #19).

PARADE:

In 1909, the parade in the afternoon of the second day began on South San Antonio Street headed by Sheriff Bill Adams, followed by Kirmse's Band, a line of automobiles, and a line of prize-winning stock. The parade headed to the fairgrounds. The 1928 parade which was the first parade after the 1923 reorganization featured the Lions Club, the Child Welfare Club, the New Braunfels High School Football team, a mini Missouri Pacific train, the 27-piece Lone Oak Band, the Gloom Chasers dance band and some commercial exhibits. Also in the parade were the Fog Horn Clarney Rodeo contestants and Mr. Hermann Lehmann in Indian costume. Mr. Lehmann had been captured by the Apache Indians in the 1870s at the age of eleven (PHOTO #20). In 1929, it was reported that there was a nighttime illuminated parade in addition to the daytime parade and the American Legion float; a decorated airplane, won \$50 for best-decorated float (PHOTO #21).

The first pet parade was held in 1937, before the daytime parade. Geese, mice, monkeys as well as cats and dogs were in the parade (PHOTO COLLAGE #22).

As mentioned, all was scaled down during WWII, however, in 1946, after the war, the Centennial Fair parade was again quite large. It was led by the New Braunfels High School band and Pep Squad in their new blue and white uniforms. The following are a few interesting observations from the late 1940s through the 1960s: the 1947 parade boasted 120 pet entries, 800 participants, and 36 horses; in 1948, hooped animals were suspended from the parade due to anthrax, but it would still be a big parade; the small pet prize in the pet parade went to a doodle bug in 1950; in 1959, the Comal County Sheriff's Mounted Posse and Junior Posse would perform drills during the parade; the 1961 parade was viewed by approximately 20,000 people and a record 30,000 came to the fairgrounds to drink 16,470 cups of beer; in 1964, the parade

marshal was Honorable Waggoner Carr, Attorney General of Texas; and in 1965, the parade marshal was Lieutenant Governor Preston Smith.

During the 1993, 100th Anniversary Celebration the Confederate Air Force did a fly over with four antique planes during the parade.

Over the next few years, the parade would be bigger and better. In 2013, there is still a pet parade beginning at 9:30 a.m. with larger parade at 10 a.m., beginning on South San Antonio Street, continuing around the plaza and across the San Antonio Street Bridge to Prince Solms Park. The parade offers the opportunity for clubs, schools, military groups, bands, political organizations and commercial enterprises to showcase their organization (PHOTO #23).

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The annual Comal County Fair began almost 120 years ago and is as significant in the lives of Comal County residents now as it was back in 1893. Citizens look forward all year to September and the fair and it is enjoyed by all ages. The emphasis of the fair has always been agriculture, animals, homemaking, exhibits, food, art, dancing, music, floats, queens, ribbons, winners, losers, beer, organizations, bands, children, families, patriotism and had the thrill of the parade, races, rodeo, and carnival. In 1998, the *Herald-Zeitung* News Editor, Susan Flynt England, made these observations: “Some things shouldn’t change like . . . products of months of tireless dedication to livestock . . . boyfriends trying to win the biggest prize at the carnival for their girlfriends . . . the eyes of small children when they see cotton candy . . . breathing suspended when human muscle and nerves are pitted against the will power of horses and steer . . . pride and competition will surface-seemingly mild homemakers when their prize recipes and needlework projects are pitted against those of their peers” . . .and finally, “Patriotism will swell, tears will prick behind the eyes of everyone watching as the bands in the Comal County Fair walk by.” That’s tradition.

Narrative prepared by Myra Lee Adams Goff, author of *It’s Fair Time, History of the Comal County Fair* and Karen Boyd. Historic photos used in the narrative obtained from collections and scrapbooks owned by the Comal County Fair Association.