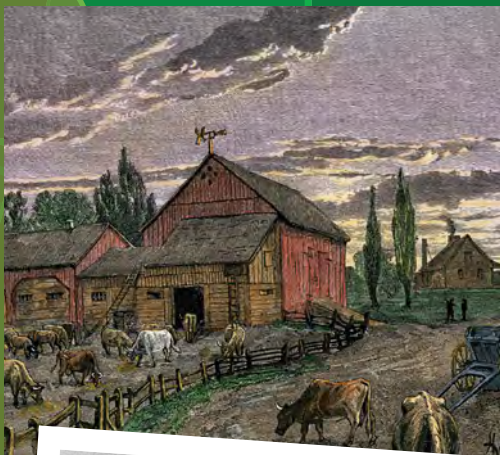


ON DISPLAY

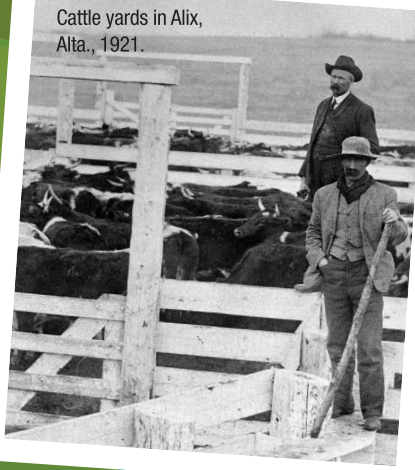
Fairgoers from 250 years ago would be surprised at all that's changed, but they'd recognize a lot too.

In Europe, especially England and Scotland, events to show off the best farm animals and crops had been common since the late 1700s. The idea was to help farmers improve what they produced by learning about new breeds, machines and methods. Fairs were often one of the first things settlers in what is now Canada got going, along with a school and a church. At first, agricultural fairs were small events, sometimes held more than once a year. Before long, the fall fair became the most popular one in many communities because the harvest was done and people could take time to gather.

Since the start, fairs have been run by agricultural societies. At first, these were mainly for well-off farmers who imported British ways and thought of themselves as gentlemen. They were not always directly involved in the actual work of running the farm and their grand ideas about how to breed better animals and grow higher-yielding crops didn't reach ordinary farmers. When these societies eventually opened up to everyone, they — and the fairs they ran — became hugely popular. Governments, keen to see farms flourish, provided money. That allowed for better organization, bigger events and more prize money. While the fall fair was still a great place to learn about better ways to farm, it was now also one of the year's most important social events for everyone in the community.



Cattle yards in Alix, Alta., 1921.



THE 1765 WINDSOR AGRICULTURAL FAIR WAS THE FIRST OF ITS KIND IN NORTH AMERICA. NOW KNOWN AS THE HANTS COUNTY EXHIBITION, THE NOVA SCOTIA FAIR WAS NAMED A NATIONAL HISTORIC EVENT IN 1935.

Boys with a steer during cattle judging at the fair in Tantallon, Sask., 1927.



Mrs. G.C. Reeves of Bath, Ont., shows off her Yorkshire sow at the 1960 Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto.

ONTARIO'S WILLIAMSTOWN FAIR HAS TAKEN PLACE EVERY YEAR SINCE 1812, SWITCHING TO A DRIVE-THROUGH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

LIVESTOCK

Beef cattle, dairy cows, sheep, horses, pigs, chickens, goats and other farm animals have always been at the centre of the fair. Not only was it a big deal to be awarded a ribbon for high quality livestock, but many buyers would pay more for an animal from a prize-winning farm. Judging livestock was a serious business, and judges were often brought in from out of the area to ensure they wouldn't know the competitors. Seeing the animals others were

raising helped farmers get ideas for how to breed stock that gave more milk, meat, eggs or wool.



Miniature horse at the Expo agricole de Saint-Hyacinthe, 2023.



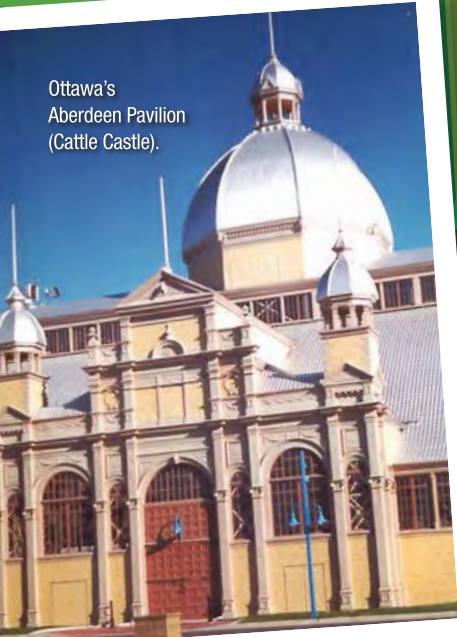
Calgary's Isabella Miller was Canada's barrel racing champion in 1960 and 1969.

ALTHOUGH THEY'RE NOT NECESSARILY WORKING ANIMALS AND AREN'T REALLY LIVESTOCK, HORSES FEATURE IN ALL KINDS OF HUGELY POPULAR EVENTS AT FAIRS.

Six-horse hitch competition at the Royal Horse Show in Toronto, 2015.



Ottawa's
Aberdeen Pavilion
(Cattle Castle).



FANCY!

Several cities built huge, beautiful exhibition buildings for their fairs, like the Aberdeen Pavilion in Ottawa. Better known as the Cattle Castle, it was built in 1898 and named after a governor general who was a fan of agricultural fairs. It was in rough shape when city council voted in 1991 to demolish it. A heritage group rallied support to save the pavilion, and in 1994, the beautifully restored building reopened. Others didn't make it. The Exhibition Palace in Fredericton, N.B., burned down in 1877. So did Calgary's impressive Industrial Building, erected for the 1908 Dominion Exhibition, in 1931. Brandon, Man., is home to the only Dominion Exhibition building still standing in Canada. It's a national historic site.

Dominion Exhibition
Display Building N° 2,
Brandon, Manitoba.



Crowds at the
Lake Saskatoon,
Alta., fair, 1916.




**A CHANCE TO SEE FRIENDS
AND NEIGHBOURS AND
TAKE A BREAK FROM HARD
WORK MEANT FAIRS WERE
SOMETHING A WHOLE
COMMUNITY LOOKED
FORWARD TO.**



Fairgoers in Weymouth,
N.S., in 1951.

CROPS

Learning about better seeds, planting methods, fertilizers and more at the fair was an important way for farmers to improve what they grew and make more money. For every type of grain such as wheat, barley, rye, flax or oats, there were many different varieties, each with a prize. Winning the ribbon for the best sheaf (like a bouquet, with the stalks and heads included) or the best tray of individual grain seeds was a huge honour. Farmers also competed to see who had the top hay, corn, and later canola and soybeans. There were even contests for the best field turnips, once a common source of animal feed.



Harvesting wheat near Moose Jaw, Sask., around 1910.

FARMERS LEARNED ABOUT THE NEWEST, MOST EFFICIENT EQUIPMENT AT THE FAIR. FARM MACHINERY MIGHT BE DISPLAYED OUTSIDE, IN BARN OR GIVEN AN ELABORATE SHOWCASE LIKE THIS SALON DE L'AGRICULTURE IN MONTREAL IN 1964.



Members of a Saskatchewan Potato Club in 1931 get their fair exhibit ready.



Picking apples, Ontario, 1919.

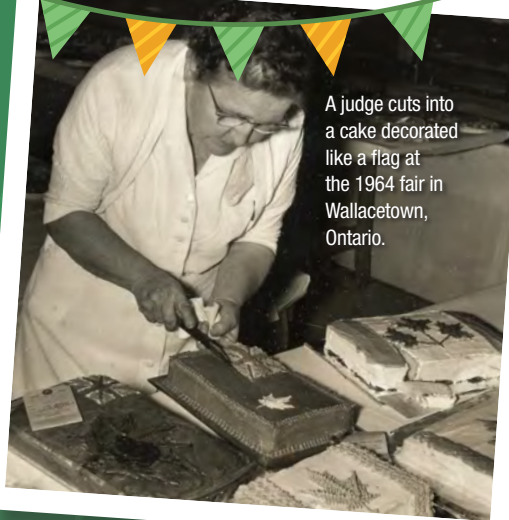
FRUIT & VEGETABLES

Farm families used to produce nearly all of their own food, including fruit and especially vegetables. Judges ranked these classes at the fair by appearance rather than taste, though. Winning produce was smooth and free of marks, with all the items the same size and shape. Other classes awarded prizes for the heaviest vegetables, featuring gigantic tomatoes, multi-legged carrots and enormous squash. For a time, elaborate arrangements of fruit and vegetables were popular as a way to show how rich and productive local farms were.



HOMECRAFT

In the days when farm women rarely worked outside the home, and were not allowed to compete in livestock or crop competitions, fairs were important places for them to show their skills. Categories for the best preserves (things like jam, pickles and canned fruit), baking, sewing, knitting and more highlighted farm women's knowledge and care for their families. These domestic arts or homecraft classes are still popular but are no longer just for women and girls.



A judge cuts into a cake decorated like a flag at the 1964 fair in Wallacetown, Ontario.



Mrs. Pat Charlie of the Cowichan First Nation dominated the knitting category at the fair in nearby Duncan, B.C., for years. She's shown here in 1952 with yet another prize-winner from the Cowichan Exhibition.



These triplet Guernsey bull calves were born at the start of the 1957 Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto.

THE BIG ONES

Canada had a national fair, called the Dominion Exhibition, from 1879 until the First World War. It moved to a different place each year. Some provincial and territorial fairs have continued much the same for more than a century: Ontario's Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, the Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition, the Manitoba Summer Fair and the Interior Provincial Exhibition in Armstrong, B.C., to name a few. P.E.I.'s provincial fair is known as Old Home Week. Expo Quebec, held in Quebec City, ran from 1897 to 2015. Events like Regina's Canadian Western Agribition and Manitoba AG EX started in the 1970s. They're essential to the business of farming, with huge livestock shows, the latest technology, education programs and lots more. Many of these big fairs also offer a chance for city kids to see what farming is about.



Manitoba Summer Fair midway in the 1960s, Brandon.

CONTESTS GALORE

From the late 1800s until the late 1900s, many places crowned a Fair Queen. The teenagers in these contests were mostly judged on their looks, but it helped to know about farming. Now open to any interested young person, the competitions award titles like Fair Ambassador. Fairs hosted lots of other contests too, including farm-related ones like sheep-shearing, milking and tractor pulls. Some fairs held more unusual events, with prizes for the kid with the most freckles or the person who was best at hoeing turnips. Baby shows were meant to spotlight healthy ways to raise children, but quickly turned into contests focused on appearance and cuteness.

CNE baby show contestants, 1954.



ENTERTAINMENT

At times, sideshows at early fairs could be racist, sexist or downright cruel — let's

leave it at that. Big grandstand shows such as demolition derbies or the RCMP's Musical Ride, shown at left, have long been popular. Fairs nearly always offer music shows, from talent contests in small tents to huge concerts by country or rock artists. Sports such as lacrosse, baseball, cycling and horse racing were also once common. If a fairground was near water, there might be waterskiing, rowing, swimming or boat races.

Many fairs kick off with a parade, like this one in Harvey, N.B. (year unknown).



FUN FOOD

If you were hungry at the fair 100 or even 50 years ago, you'd probably have bought a homemade sandwich or butter tart from a booth run by a church or other community group. Or maybe you'd get a hot dog and some caramel corn on the midway. Over the years, things like pickle ice cream, a burger on doughnut buns, deep-fried butter and garlic lemonade have all shown up at food stands, especially at the bigger fairs. Let's just say that food at the fair isn't supposed to be good for you.



Kids enjoy cotton candy at a Canadian fair (location unknown), 1972.