

# History of the Merced County Fair

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Here's a pop quiz for history buffs:

Where did the U.S. Army station a chemical training unit?

Where did the Lennon Sisters perform?

Where was Merced's first museum?

The Merced County Fairgrounds. Of course, it's hosted the Merced County Fair for decades, but the fairgrounds has also housed a county library branch, a fire station, a school for the handicapped, a preschool program and it was the "birthplace" of Merced College and Gracey Elementary School. And did you know Merced College used to have its foreign language labs in a fairgrounds beer booth? The beer was removed, naturally.

The fairgrounds was where high school teams played baseball and where football games were played before there was a Stadium '76. And it's still used as a polling place during elections.

The Merced County Fairgrounds has been the site of thousands of wedding receptions, parties, banquets, dinners, dances, quincineras and proms, not to mention home and garden shows, bridal fairs, Hmong New Year's celebrations, circuses and car shows.

Except for a few years when money was scarce, and during World War II, Merced County has had a fair since 1891. The first Merced County Fair, representing the districts of Merced and Mariposa counties, started out in a pavilion on 18th Street on September 2, 1891.

The beginning of the fair "as we know it today," according to the first fair manager, W.C. Woxberg, was a two-day event on Sept. 14-15, 1929, in the old Municipal Baseball Park we now call Applegate Park. The Merchants' Association sponsored fairs there through 1931 and usually had a rodeo and small 4-H livestock shows.

Today's fairgrounds began in 1931 with a small parcel at 11th and G Streets. In 1933 the state legalized wagering at racetracks to support fairs, but for the first few years there wasn't enough money to cover the prizes paid out. In 1934 a building was erected to house the stock show. By 1936, the fair was broke, so there wasn't one that year. Donations by businesses got the fair going again in 1937. The next year the fair began charging 25 cents for general admission. Kids under 12 got in free.

The 1937 Merced-Mariposa Fair was a big deal and included a parade, a three-day horse racing program, livestock show, farm exhibits and a Hollywood Revue. By 1941 the fair was a financial success – the Pavilion was built, and the fair not only got out of debt, but ended up \$2,000 in the black "with an unheard of crowd of 18,000 people," according to Mr. Woxberg. But that wouldn't last.

It wasn't long after Pearl Harbor was bombed on Dec. 7, 1941 that the fairgrounds and facilities were leased to the federal government. The Army moved into the fairgrounds putting up 200 barrack buildings. They became a "Japanese Reception Center" to house more than 5,000 Japanese internees who had been ordered to report for relocation. They stayed until August 1942 when most were taken by train to an internment camp in Colorado.

There was a fair in 1942 but it didn't include many ag exhibits because farmers were too busy growing food to feed the nation. The smaller fair consisted of livestock, poultry and flower displays. The fair was held only during daylight hours because of the wartime curfew and blackout restrictions. The rodeo and entertainment were eliminated.

Later that year, Army personnel arrived at the fairgrounds for training, including a chemical warfare section and an infantry unit. During the war years, about 5,500 black troops also were quartered there.

After the war, the fairgrounds was turned over to the 35th District Agricultural Association and the fair returned in 1946 with a record-breaking attendance of 30,000.

To show you what a dollar used to buy, from 1934 to 1947, \$200,000 in state and federal funds were spent on fairground improvements, including refurbishing the Exhibit Building and erecting a new combined agricultural and commerce building, the grandstand, livestock barns, floriculture and poultry buildings and an outdoor dance floor. That price tag would amount to about a bazillion dollars in 2002 money.

The fair was originally held in September, then switched to the second week of August, then moved up to the third week in July, where it remains.

Parades became a big part of the pre-fair festivities in the Thirties. The 1938 Merced-Mariposa Fair parade was huge with everything from ox teams, surreys, buckboards, overland schooners and chuck wagons to the most stylish 1930s vintage automobile. There were colorful floats from every district and town in the two counties, several uniformed bands and a procession of people on horseback.

In the Eighties the parade died out but made a comeback in July 1991 during the fair's 100th anniversary celebration. Leading the floats, bands and riding units was Grand Marshal William Woxberg; the first paid manager of the fair. He retired in 1968 and died in 2001 at the age of 98.

To ensure that all local baseball teams had an up-to-date baseball field where they could play night games, a park was constructed at 11th and G streets at a cost of \$50,000. Dedicated in 1949, the biggest impetus for the new baseball field was provided by the Merced Bears, "champions of the San Joaquin Valley," who played all their home games in Atwater during the 1948 season.

The county's museum was originally located at the fairgrounds in what was once a home facing onto J Street. In 1948 remodeling began on the cobblestone building for the Merced County Historical Museum. The museum opened that year to display photographs, collections, a gun display and other items of historical interest.

The J. Emmett McNamara Memorial Museum was named for the man who spearheaded the drive to acquire a permanent fair site. The museum and contents were moved to the Old Courthouse Building beginning in 1977.

Now Merced's first museum is the "Director's Lounge," and is used throughout the year. It serves as a polling place during elections.

A variety of organizations have been housed at the fairgrounds over the years including the Tuberculosis Association, The Polio Association, The American Cancer Society, the Bureau of Reclamation, the local Farm Bureau chapter, the Catholic Youth Organization, The American Red Cross, Boy Scouts, Sea Scouts, the Army Reserve and a model railroad club.

The Merced County Office of Education once leased space at the fairgrounds for a school for mentally handicapped children. A Merced County Fire Department station was located at the fairgrounds before moving to the new station across the street.

For the first three weeks of the 1986 school year, the 650 students and staff of Leontine Gracey School held classes at the fairgrounds while their new school was finished.

Merced College got its start at the fairgrounds in 1963. The PE shower and locker room was a converted bracero barracks, and the same stand that sold tacos during the fair doubled as the journalism photo lab during the school year. Many of the classrooms were separated only by dividers. One MC instructor suggested that MC students were better educated than students attending some older sister institutions since they could hear the lectures in adjacent classes equally as well as the lecture in their own classroom. At the end of the school year in May, each classroom had to be packed up and put away to make way for the fair. And every September through 1966, the "Vanishing Campus" reappeared at the fairgrounds.

The Merced County Fair has always mirrored the times.

When Castle Air Force Base was open, there were often military displays at the fair and discounts for admission were given to military personnel and their families. The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis had an operative iron lung at its booth in 1947, during the polio epidemic. The same year, the Merced Stanislaus Counties Tuberculosis Association's Mobile Unit offered free chest exams to fairgoers.

Fair entertainment continues to change with the times from a Water Follies show in the Forties featuring the "worlds' largest portable swimming pool" as well as vaudeville and Hollywood acts, to an appearance by The Lennon Sisters, a popular singing group from The Lawrence Welk Show.

The diverse list of entertainers featured at the fair over the years includes everybody from Collin Raye and Tiny Tim to Buck Owens.

In 1948, Betty Hansen Rouff, described as a "pert 19-year-old Los Banos housewife" was selected Queen of the Fair. Her prize for winning was an all expense paid trip to Hollywood and an appearance on the "Queen for a Day" radio program.

For several fairs it was customary for some lucky fairgoer to win a new car in a drawing – it was a Buick sedan at the 1954 fair. During the Fifties the award in the Cake Baking class in the Home Economics division was one pound of butter a week for a year.

Somewhere between the Sixties and the Eighties, hands-on entertainment such as hamburger eating contests and diaper derbies died out to be replaced by hands-on crafts, art and music-making.

There are some things that are enjoying a comeback at the fair. For years the fair crowned a Miss Merced County Rodeo Queen starting in 1941 with 17-year-old Dorothy "Dottie" Fragie Greer of Merced. Dottie, who learned how to ride when she was a little girl, wowed the judges with her expert horsemanship skills riding Golden Pride. That Palomino stallion was sought after by cowboy star, Gene Autry, but he didn't buy it because the big horse made him look short. The Japanese Army decided to pass on the Palomino for the same reason when they inspected it just before the war started. At 78, Dottie was excited to see the Rodeo Queen contest revived at the fair, with the crowning of Merced College student, Breanne Christie of Merced, in 2001.