



June 5-9, 2024
It's A Barnyard Mardi Gras

35th District Agricultural Association



History of the Merced County Fair

Except for a few years when money was scarce and during World War II, Merced County has held a fair every year 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 Merced County Fair "as we know it today," according to the first Fair manager, W.C. Woxberg, was a two-day event on September 14 & 15, 1929, in the old Municipal Baseball Park, which is now called Applegate Park. The Merchants' Association sponsored fairs there through 1931, which usually included a rodeo and small 4-H livestock shows. It wasn't until 1931, that the Fair moved to its current location on 11th and G streets.

Unfortunately, by 1936 the Fair was broke and so the Fairgrounds went dark. However, local businesses pooled together funds to get the Fair up and running again by 1937. That year's Merced-Mariposa Fair was a big deal! It included a parade, a three-day horse racing program, livestock show, farm exhibits and a Hollywood Revue. The next year, in 1938, the Fair started charging 25 cents for general admission (kids 12 and under were free) to help make the Fair more fiscally sound. By 1941, the Fair was a financial success – the new Pavilion was built and the Fair not only got out of debt, but ended up \$2,000 in the black "with an unheard crowd of 18,000 people," according to Mr. Woxberg. But that wouldn't last.

It wasn't long after Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941, that the fairgrounds and facilities were leased to the Federal government to serve as an assembly center for 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.

A fair was held that year but didn't include many ag exhibits because farmers were too busy growing food to feed the nation. The smaller 1942 fair consisted solely of livestock, poultry and flower displays; it was held only during daylight hours because of the wartime curfew and blackout restrictions. Another fair wouldn't be held until 1946 when it was turned over to the 35th District Agricultural Association, part of the California Department of Food & Agriculture. That year's Fair had a record-breaking 30,000 people attend.

Since then, the Merced County Fairgrounds has served many purposes – it has housed a county library branch, a fire station, a school for the mentally-handicapped, a preschool program and was the "birthplace" of Merced College and temporarily housed the Leontine Gracey Elementary School while construction was being completed on the new school. It was also a one-time home to the J. Emmett McNamara Memorial Museum before the collection was moved to the Old Courthouse Building in 1977; the building on the Fairgrounds now serves as the Director's Lounge during the Fair, and is then rented throughout the year. It has seen thousands of wedding receptions, parties, banquets, dinners, dances, quinceañeras, proms and many other important events in the community.

Since its inception, the Merced County Fair has always been an annual event that brings the community together to celebrate! From a simple two-day event to now featuring five days of great free entertainment, exhibits, carnival rides, delicious Fair food and countless memories for nearly 70,000 Fairgoers that attend, the Merced County Fair is a wonderful tradition and gathering place for our community. Join us for a Barnyard Mardi Gras at the 2024 Merced County Fair, June 5 – 9.