

A history of the Flos Agriculture Society

by Jessie Thompson

(The following is taken from a history of Elmvale on file at the Flos-Elmvale Public Library; the editor) Hillsdale, being situated on the Penetang Road, was an important stop on the stage route, and the business and social centre of the entire area of Medonte and Flos Townships.

The first agriculture fair was held at Hamilton Inn at Lot 60, Con. 1, Flos Township (in Hillsdale) under the combine efforts of the settlers of Medonte and Flos, in 1860. It is recorded that the first fair was well attended with great merrymaking. Thereafter, it became an annual event, but, after the tavern license of the Hamilton Inn, taken out in 1839, had been cancelled, in 1860, the site of the fair was moved to new locations, in and around the Village of Hillsdale.

From a historical standpoint, the most important document to be preserved in respect to the fair is a list of officers and subscribers to The Medonte and Flos Agriculture Society for 1870. It reads as follows: President, John Johnston; Vice-President, Arthur Craig; Secretary, William Harvey; Treasurer, John Craig; Directors, James Small, John Fitzgerald, William Johnston, John Ritchie, James Greenlaw, William May, John Craig, William Harvey, James Johnston.

At a meeting held on July 26, 1870, it was agreed that the fair be held on Oct. 14, 1870.

In the 1870s, fairs were held at Hillsdale along Gloucester Road, on the lot where Jos. Lea's house now stands. Rows of pens for sheep, pigs, and calves were situated along the roadside. Other livestock was displayed on the lot.

Hillsdale, at that time was a thriving community, and provided every accommodation required by Fair visitors.

In the early 1880s, the fair was held on the land south of the Presbyterian Cemetery. A long shed was there for the purpose of exhibiting produce, and horses were shown in John Faragher's barn. A race track was in the field, and horses were shown along the road.

In 1881, the first fair was held in the Village of Elmvale, the locale being changed from Hillsdale at that date.

The following officers were chosen to form the Agriculture Society for 1891: President, R. Graham; Vice-President, Wm. Mills; Directors, John Anderson, Thos. D. Cooper, Thos. Ritchie, W. Quantz, W. Spring, J. Rowat, Harvey Maguire, Harvey Henry, Geo. Hickling; Secretary, R. Hm Middleton; Treasurer, W. A. Sneath. (Taken from Elmvale Advocate of 1891)

A notice to this effect appeared in the Chronicle and North Simcoe Advocate, now The Lance, issued in Elmvale on Aug. 17, 1893. The notice stated that "The Flos Agriculture Society will hold its 12th Annual Exhibition in Driving Park (now Agriculture Park), Elmvale, on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, October 10, 11, and 12. The directors are putting forth every effort to make this the greatest exhibition ever held here."

Prior to a permanent site being obtained, it was customary to have fairs in farmers' fields. At different times, fairs were held on the Paterson property, N¹/₂ Lot 5, Con. 8, and on Thos. Ritchie's farm, near the site of the former public school. The building used to display exhibits is now used by Mr. Earl Drysdale as a garage. It was situated on the property owned by Mrs. R. A. Cooper, and occupied then by Mr. McCrimmon, a wheelwright.

About 1885, the present fairgrounds was put in shape and the same year a grant of \$500 was received from the Simcoe County Council.

Little is now known of the officers who guided the association through the early days, but it is certain that "Big John" Ritchie was then president. For the first eight or nine years, a large tent was used to display exhibits.

The first and only Agriculture Hall was finished in time for the Fair, in 1906. Wm. Rowley did the carpenter work and Albert Ganton put in the cement floor and foundation. This building, a large two-storey structure, was erected on the south-east corner of the Agriculture Park. It was a frame building which became weatherbeaten with age. The east end was a long one-storey extension, with a stage and office along the east end. In this part, there was enough room to seat 1,000 persons and 400 new chairs arrived in time for the

concert, in 1906. In the winter, the extension area was used for a curling rink.

In the early 1900s, the concert on the closing night was an important feature of the fair. Entertainers were brought in from large centres, and presented concerts of the highest calibre. On two occasions, the 48th Highlanders' Band rendered highly successful performances. The one of 1908, consisted of 17 numbers. Admission: 75cents, 50 cents and 35 cents.

At fair time, special trains ran from Barrie to Elmvale, stopping at all intermediate stations, carrying visitors to the fair. Such train service was offered in the early 1900s before the arrival of the automobile. The attendance at the fair was great, in 1905; it was stated that 5,000 had attended on the final day.

The year 1952 saw the Elmvale Memorial Arena first used as a display area for the fair exhibits. The old two-storey building was cut down to one storey, and moved north to a new location, where it became a shed for livestock, and the other part was dismantled and the lumber used for sheds.

A grandstand was built, in 1901, near the southwest corner of the fairgrounds. Many patrons, protected from sun and rain, watched the horse races from it. In the 1920s, the grandstand was burned. Incidentally, a stable for the race horses was located under the grandstand.

Before the arena was built, the race track was a half-mile circular one; the fair buildings were outside the track. Livestock was led across to be judged, and midway attractions were inside the race course, as well.

In 1948, the Junior School Fair was formed to encourage the pupils to take an interest in bettering farm and garden produce. Mr. Stewart Page, Barrie, gave much advice and encouragement to the School Fair, and the junior exhibitors. This fair was successful and was later an important segment of the Fall Fair.

In 1956, the Elmvale Curling Club was given permission to erect a curling rink, joined to the west of the arena. At fair time, it is used to display baking, needlework, Women's Institute exhibits, flowers, and industrial arts displays

by the high school students.

In 1959, the Elmvale Fair celebrated its 100th anniversary. To commemorate this important occasion, new entrance gates were erected. The following is printed on the gate plaques: "Flos Agriculture Society 1859-1959; Presented by Ontario Department of Agriculture in Recognition of 100 years' Service, Tuesday, September 22, 1959" and "Flos Agriculture Society 1859-1959; To Honour the Pioneers of this Community and all those who during The Past 100 Years, Have served the Community Agriculture."

The Ontario coat of arms is shown on both plaques. In Centennial Year, the fair was a great success with a very large attendance. A special centennial parade consisted of many articles common 100 years ago: a s u r r e y

"with a fringe on top" with occupants dressed as they did in days gone by; horse and buggies, a "dog" churn belonging to Mr. F. Bumstead, a steam engine elegant with a new coat of paint and brass shined up, a hand-fed thresher, the old and the new fire engines, and gasoline delivery trucks, the old horse-drawn.

Mrs. Clarence Ritchie, the Centennial Queen, rode in a buggy with her nephew, Jack Fleming. The queen, appropriately dressed in a gold-colour taffeta bridal gown of Mrs. Caston, Hillsdale, and was at least

100 years old. She wore high-laced boots, and an old-fashioned black bonnet, worn many years ago by

Mrs. Jon. Houden Sr. To complete her outfit, Mrs. Ritchie wore her own wedding gloves which matched her dress in colour. Her companion was dressed in tails and a black topper.

For very many years, the school parade on the second day of the fair has been described by many as the best in Simcoe County. The floats have been outstanding, depicting national, seasonal, current history, nursery rhymes, and many other topics. A great deal of planning and work go into obtaining costumers, and decorating floats, such that the pupils and teachers are to be commended for their efforts. I, personally, was involved in these parades for nearly 40 years, first as a pupil, and then as a teacher.

The following is a list of the Flos Agriculture Fair presidents and may not be complete:

- John Johnston (farmer, teacher)
- John Ritchie (farmer)
- Robert Peters (hardware merchant)
- Richard Graham (farmer, councillor)
- Walter Rowley (farmer)
- George Fleming (farmer)
- Stanley Tipping (creamery operator)
- Thomas Smith (farmer, township clerk)
- Walter Middleton (farmer, township reeve, warden of Simcoe County)
- Reginald Bertram (farmer)
- Cecil French (teacher)
- Earl Elliott (farmer)
- Donald Bertram (farmer)
- Lloyd Dunlop (furniture dealer)

Owing to the fire in the arena, there was no place to display exhibits, and for the first time in 115 years Elmvale held no fair, in 1975.



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