

# 119 years of change

Ontario's fall agricultural fairs are all under-going basic changes these days. With a steady drop in the rural population and a corresponding increase among those living in urban areas, many new problems have arisen. Indeed, these factors have combined in such a manner that some fall fairs have gone under entirely. Those that survived are being forced to adapt to the new realities of the 1970's.

The Markham Fair is in the forefront of those which have made a successful transition between the old and the new, and it seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

The Fair started out as a sort of forum of the agricultural community. To the Fair came farmers from the entire district, some of them literally travelling for two days to attend. They would gather to see all the latest machinery to make farmwork easier and more profitable; they would proudly display the best of their produce, and inspect that submitted by their neighbours; the wives would show off their cooking skills and catch up on the latest gossip.

There was little in the way of "amusements" as we know them; just being at the Fair was an important annual event in the lives of the farm families. The games were few and simple: perhaps some of the men would toss horseshoes, perhaps a travelling

snake-oil peddler would extoll the benefits of his particular "elixir". The children, at first shy at seeing so many people at once, would soon be playing their own games.

Despite these unhappy side-issues, the Fair continued to grow. The Railroad Age dawned, and special trains were run to Markham for the Fair. Judging by contemporary accounts, the railway carriages were packed to the roof, with people riding on the cowcatchers and engine tenders. Horses strained, brass bands marched, and in 1912 the exhibits drew 3,500 entries.

The signs of change were ever-present. In 1915 the whole district was in a frenzy of excitement over a new event, the first of its type in Markham: an automobile race. Six cars competed, a McLaughlin-Buick beating out another car of the same make and four Model-T Fords.

It was soon obvious that the automobile was a factor to be reckoned with. Model T's, Chevrolets, Gray-Dorts, Stanleys, and others carried an ever-growing number of people to the Fair. The special trains became fewer and fewer, and finally stopped altogether.

The Fair struggled on through the Dirty Thirties, frequently in the red but kept alive by the generosity of local citizens. In 1943 the last mortgage was burned; in 1949 the Fair achieved "Class B" status, eligible for federal grants.

The Fair by now has become an integral part of life in Markham. It is a mirror and barometer of the changes affecting the life-style of the district. Change, indeed, has been the one constant of the Fair. It has met all challenges and survived.

Herewith, then, some of the history and people of the Markham Fair.



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