

# Fair president still horses around

BY HANNELORE VOLPE  
Staff Writer

Blair Purcell is this year's Markham Fair president.

He's proud of the new events at the fair, scheduled to draw in new visitors, along with the emphasis on the event's rural and agricultural character.

Mr. Purcell has been immersed in his family business his entire life. His dad, Lionel Purcell, began raising Shetland ponies in the 1950s. The senior Purcell originally had his pony farm on Birchmount Avenue near Steeles Avenue before moving Lionel's Pony Farm to McCowan Road on the Whitchurch-Stouffville/Markham border in 1982.

Blair Purcell's skill with horses has led him to travel extensively, pursuing his dream of driving a large wagon with a team of draft horses.

From 1984 to 1986, the 43-year-old visited towns across the United States with the Coors wagon and a six or eight draft horses, which was used to promote the brewery.

A true family man, the former Stouffville Clipper junior C hockey player makes it a point to treat relatives (his whole family is involved in the fair) and other staff members at the fair as his "fair family."

**Q: What is new at the fair this year?**

**A:** A daily parade. There hasn't been one since the fair moved to its current location on McCowan Road at Elgin Mills Road in 1977. The old fair was in Markham at highways 48 and 7. The parade starts at 11:30 a.m. the Thursday of the fair. Friday and Saturday, it's at 6 p.m. and Sunday at 11 a.m. There will be many breeds of horses in the parade and there will be signs naming the breeds. Also, the pony rides and pig races will be moved to near the east entrance. There will be daily fireworks, culminating in a spectacular show the Saturday evening of the fair.

**Q: How is the fair reaching out to students?**

**A:** Two years ago, we put together a curriculum that works with schools. Last year, we saw an increase in the number of school children over previous years. This year some schools will be coming from as far away as Etobicoke and Oshawa.

**Q: Are you involved in any specific preparations for the fair?**

10 minutes with

## BLAIR PURCELL

An occasional feature with Whitchurch-Stouffville's newsmakers

**A:** One day a year I go to the farm of Harry and Esther Lewis with my horses. They're hitched to the wheat binder. We hand (gather) the wheat. It's kept for threshing at the antique farm machinery display at the fair.

**Q: Where did you get your love of horses?**

**A:** From my family. My dad, Lionel, has been showing ponies since the 1950s.

**Q: How has Lionel's Pony Farm grown over the years?**

**A:** At first, we were just offering pony rides to the public. We had close to 100 ponies through the 1960s and '70s. The other animals came mainly through donations from various people. Around 1998, I bought my first team of Belgians from Murray Grove. Now, we can offer more wagon rides and sleigh rides at the farm.

**Q: Where else would people have seen your horses besides on the farm?**

**A:** The horses have been used in film work. We provided horses for all the Road to Avonlea and Anne of Green Gables TV shows. When the CBC needed horses or other animals for shows or movies, they would call dad.

**Q: What was a low point in your life and business?**

**A:** We lost all of our show ponies in a fire at the old location. When we moved here, we had ponies who survived the fire because they were living outside.

**Q: What in your educational background helps you in your work?**

**A:** I graduated from the King campus of Seneca College as a farrier and was certified in truck driving from George Brown College in Toronto. I also completed an electrical certification course.

**Q: Do you compete with your horse team?**

**A:** I competed in the World Belgian Horse Show in 2000 in Columbus Ohio, in 2004 in London and I am hoping to go to Indianapolis in 2008.

**Q: What was a highlight during your years in the U.S.?**

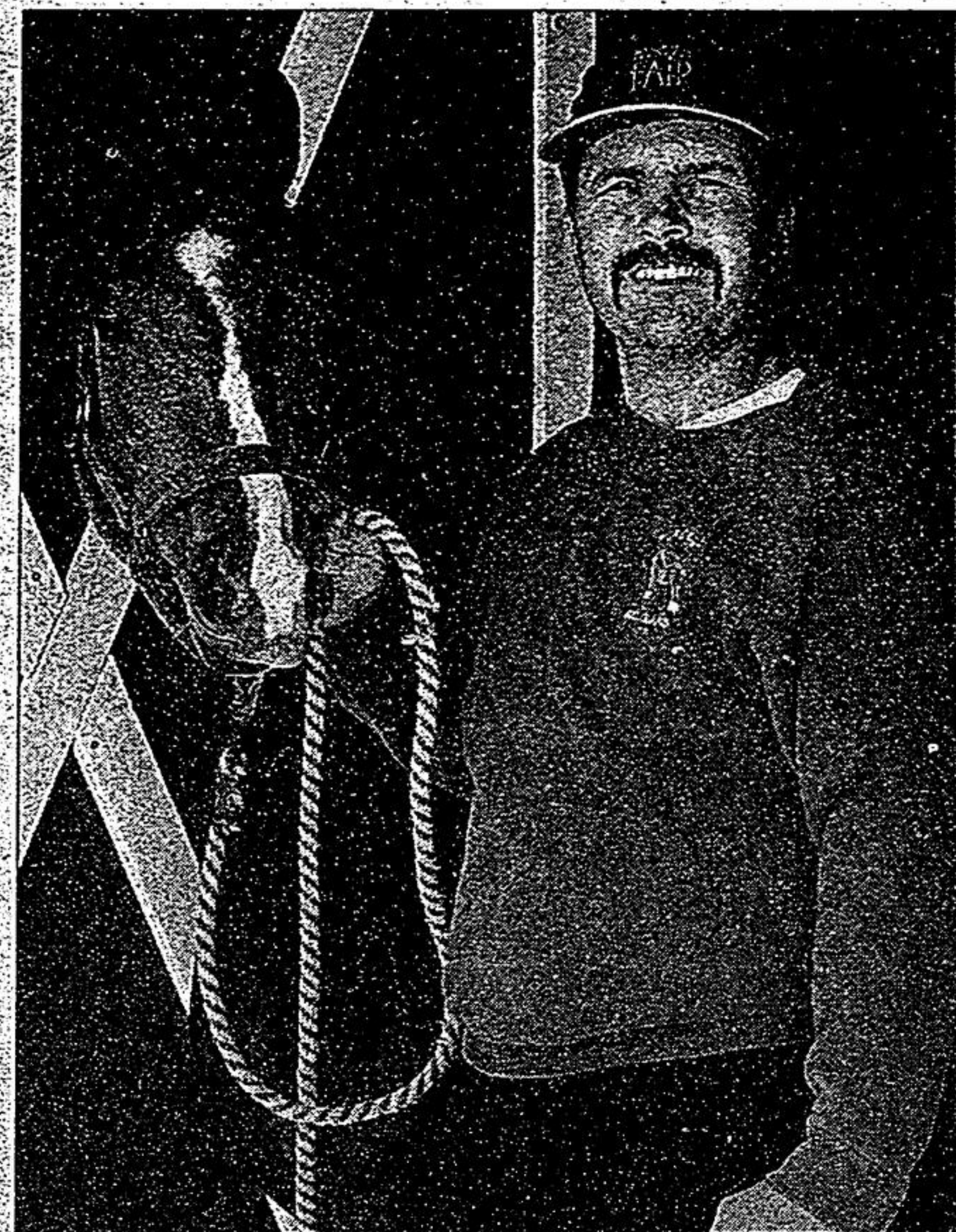
**A:** While in the States, I was asked to help put together a 40-horse hitch for a museum in Wisconsin that keeps circus wagons from Ringling Brothers, Gärden Brothers and other circuses. I was able to help them for a couple of years and had a chance of driving the 40-horse hitch.

**Q: What do you find most exciting in the equestrian field?**

**A:** It is still a thrill to sit up on the wagon (in competition). There is no greater high. But it can be devastating if you have to pull out of the class.

**Q: What is a fair highlight for you?**


**A:** The fact that the trophy I won for junior high point winner at the 1977 Gymkhana horse show is still given out to winners every year. They get their own keepsake trophy, but their name is inscribed on the original trophy, which stays with the Markham Fair.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Markham Fair president Blair Purcell remembers vividly winning a junior horse trophy at the fair 30 years ago.


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