

The End of the Danbury Fair

The Danbury Fair Mall April 1, 2010



If one were to look north while traveling along Backus Avenue today in Danbury, CT they would be confronted by the Danbury Fair Mall, the second largest shopping complex in Connecticut and the 5th largest in New England (depicted above). A massive parking lot surrounds the Danbury Mall, which boasts hundreds of venues including an Apple store, Dick's Sporting Goods, Michael Kors, Victoria Secret, Macy's, J.C. Penney, the Cheesecake factory and most recently a Microsoft and L.L. Bean store. On top of all that the mall is rumored to be acquiring a full size movie theater soon, which would make it possibly the most popular place in all of Connecticut. However, in 1981 between October 2 and October 12, one would have encountered a very different scene on the north side of Backus Ave. A person would have

viewed thousands of people finding great amusement and entertainment at the oldest agricultural fair in America, the Danbury State Fair (shown below).

The Danbury Fair 1970's



Agricultural fairs have existed in America since the late 17th century, but state fairs did not start to take off until the early 1800's. In the beginning of the 20th century many state fairs were acquiring permanent locations near urban areas, in order to attract larger crowds from greater local populations. The Danbury Fair found a permanent location early on in 1869 because it was originally a neighborhood fair and not a state one. The Danbury Fair started at a much smaller scale than most state fairs because it was the result of a spontaneous revelation to create a social interaction for the community that could only result from the neighborhood spirit.

¹ Connecticut is one of very few states not to have a state fair, but the Danbury Fair would come

¹ Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*. 130-132.

to be known as the Danbury State Fair simply due to the sheer size and popularity that it acquired. Other than this simple technicality the Danbury Fair followed the same trend line of all American State Fairs in its evolution from a simple agricultural event to a full-scale agricultural, social, and entrepreneurial gathering.² In this paper I examine the reasons for the conclusion of the Danbury Fair and the establishment of the Mall. At the time of the selling of the Danbury fairgrounds, which were owned by the estate of the late John W. Leahy; Mr. Fearn, the fair's president and general manager as well as one of the executors of the estate, said \$24 million was an offer that could not be refused by them in the interest of the Leahy heirs.³ I, on the other hand, argue that there were many other factors other than the high price that brought about the ending of the Danbury Fair. The common trend of American Agricultural fairs coupled with an explosion in population and the continual expansion of humans disconnection with nature since the colonial era; which consisted of the decline of agriculture importance in the Northeast and the expansion of industrial production and consumption in midwestern Connecticut were the main causes for the change of the Danbury Fairgrounds from a place of yearly agricultural celebration to one of a year-round consumption.

In 1821 the town of Danbury held its first agricultural fair, but it was not until 1869 that the fair became an annual event. That year, in a small tent, the Danbury Farmers and Manufacturers Society held the first annual fair on a property known as the Danbury Pleasure Park. Later, the society purchased 100 acres of the park's grounds and launched what would become the Danbury State Fair.⁴ The fair consisted of a very small-scale venue with the purpose of providing a location for local farmers to showcase their produce. Common items displayed in the Farmer's tent included leaf tobacco, homemade wines, fruits, and vegetables;

² Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*. New York: Morningside Heights: Columbia University Press 1935 46-47.

³ Richard L. Madden, "A Bittersweet Opening for Danbury State Fair," *New York Times*, 5 Oct. 1981

⁴ "The Danbury Fair, 1869-1981," *ConnecticutHistory.org*, <http://connecticuthistory.org/the-danbury-fair-1869-1981/> (accessed 26 Oct. 2013).

while the Manufacturers' tent presented locally made hats, boots, stoves, and wagons, among other products.⁵ From their establishment agricultural fairs were traditionally looked upon as a means of promoting agricultural stimulation, inspiration, and information. They were conducted on the theory that competitive displays of products would prompt farmers to improve their livestock and crops and to adopt new agricultural methods and machinery.⁶ The showcasing of produce was the main purpose of fairs for a very brief period of time because the event quickly turned into one of competition where farmers and manufacturers would compete with one another to present the best produce and therefore achieve the most sales. Year after year fairs provide concentrated surveys of agricultural activity, idealizing the accomplishments of agriculture, setting forth a vast number of visual educational stimuli and pointing the direction of agricultural improvement. The large fairs particularly show what has been and what can be accomplished in agricultural production.⁷ During the late 19th century the Danbury Fair kept its traditional agricultural purpose and values fairly well and the main attractions remained the animal and farm-grown food exhibits.⁸ In comparing produce, farmers were able to learn from one another how to improve their crop and livestock production and each year were fueled by the desire to win the Fair's competition and not just have a good harvest. However, this locus of agricultural importance was about to change following the national alterations in societal values and the economy.

In the beginning of the 20th century, U.S. farmers and the amount of agricultural capital were becoming relatively less important as compared to other classes of the population and the economic assets with which the latter worked. Even before 1914 it was becoming increasingly

⁵ "The Danbury Fair," *ConnecticutHistory.org*

⁶ Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*. 156, 162

⁷ Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*. 158

⁸ "The Danbury Fair," *ConnecticutHistory.org*

evident that agriculture was not sharing proportionately in the general prosperity.”⁹ In order to maintain agricultural fairs managers added attractive features in order to sustain their popularity. The Danbury Fair administration added buildings to house and display animal exhibits that included horses, cows, pigs, poultry, sheep, and a number of small animals.¹⁰ Every year the fair attracted more and more people. It was heavily advertised in newspapers throughout Connecticut, New England, and New York, and drew huge crowds. Railroad and bus companies even offered reduced rates to fair-goers traveling from points near and far.¹¹ The money spent to make fairs lavish with spectacular entertainment to attract large crowds is indicative of the fact they were becoming 20th century business enterprises.¹² Originally a three-day event, the annual fair eventually extended to 10 days each year. It was only ever suspended twice in its long history as a result of the national crisis of the Spanish Influenza epidemic in 1918, and from 1942-1945, during World War II.¹³

In the early decades of the 20th century, the Danbury Fair converted into a true social gathering; a place to show produce, have a few beers, watch the sword swallowers and hoochie-coochie dancers, then head to the grandstand to watch the trotters race. By 1929, horse and auto races were the fair’s two most popular attractions. This was not unique to the Danbury Fair; horse racing is by far the most characteristic sport of the traditional agricultural fair. “To millions of fair-goers in the last three-quarters of a century it has been no doubt the chief attraction of the fair.”¹⁴ At the Danbury Fair the horse races took place on the track for the first five days of the fair, and the auto races on Saturday, the last day of the fair. At this time the fair began to greatly accelerate its loss of agricultural integrity as entertainment and gambling

⁹ Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*. 110-111

¹⁰ “The Danbury Fair,” *ConnecticutHistory.org*

¹¹ “The Danbury Fair,” *ConnecticutHistory.org*

¹² Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*. 114-115

¹³ “The Danbury Fair,” *ConnecticutHistory.org*

¹⁴ Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*. 190-191

attractions such as horse and auto racing began taking away popularity from the agricultural aspects. It no longer existed as an agricultural fair to boost profits for farmers and manufacturers, but represented more of a social gathering for fair-goers to celebrate traditional values of the past and enjoy themselves in general. The fair preserved these traditional values in its agricultural and livestock displays and competitions, reminding those of the general public who did not produce food for a living, where their sustenance comes from. Although many fair-goers at this time came away with some knowledge about modern and historical agriculture in CT, and were reminded about the importance of the land in our nation's history; most people attended the Danbury Fair to take their kids to the rides, or to bet on the races.

The Fair's separation from its agricultural roots grew even greater with the arrival of John W. Leahy. Already a successful businessman, owner of a machine shop and of Leahy's Fuel Oil, Leahy obtained some stock in the agricultural society and the fair. He then started buying up the stock that remained, and in 1946, the first year the fair reopened after being closed during World War II, the Danbury State Fair opened as a John W. Leahy production. Being a natural showman, Leahy added many of the Fair's memorable features including the New England Village, the Dutch Village, and the petting show, with the purpose of increasing the attraction of the fair. In 1959, in order to create the Dutch Village, Leahy turned 35 acres of the fairgrounds into an exact replica of New York City under Dutch rule. He believed this setup would draw many more New York State people to the fair, which it did. In fact, the 1959 fair drew more than 200,000 people, the most successful year in its history at the time.¹⁵ He even brought circus animals to the fair, including elephants and seals, in order to attract an even larger variety of people. He made many structural improvements to the grounds as well, adding hard-surface

¹⁵ Sunday Herald, 18 Oct. 1959. Google.com newspapers.

driveways, fences, and new lighting and repairing buildings and the midway.¹⁶ Although these improvements made the fair area more hospitable to many, it took away from the rustic agricultural look that it had portrayed for so many years. Agricultural values and history diminished slightly with the changing events and increasing artificial aesthetics of the fair, but it was the fad of the automobile that altered the fair's traditional character the most.

The Danbury Fair continued to expand successfully under Leahy's direction because he understood the changing times and how to alter aspects of the fair in order to draw the greatest crowds. In 1946, Leahy's first year running the fair, he converted the trotting track to an auto track, which became known as the Danbury 'Racearena,' where midget and stock cars raced all summer.¹⁷ The automobile proved a boon to the state fairs in general, because by reducing the time-space element it stimulated both an increase in attendance and an increase in exhibits."¹⁸ No longer were the Danbury fairgrounds a ghost town that only came alive during that special time of year when the long awaited state fair returned, but the entire summer held racing events attended by many. The extended activity of auto-racing took away from the significance of the Danbury Fair, because its main attraction now occurred outside of the fair's traditional schedule.¹⁹ This is an important change in the fair's nature because it illustrates the expanding disconnection of New England society from the land New Englanders live upon. Fairs were originally held at the shift from summer to fall so that they could coincide with the harvesting of crops. This event emphasized our attachment to natural cycles, but the extension of the use of the fairground into summer took away from this connection. As a result of the establishment of the auto track, the automobile culture featured prominently throughout the years at the Danbury

¹⁶ "The Danbury Fair," *ConnecticutHistory.org*

¹⁷ Robert Miller, "A Love Affair with the Fair," *Newstimes.com*, 4 Oct. 2011, <http://www.newstimes.com/local/article/A-love-affair-with-the-fair-2201896.php> (accessed 5 Nov. 2013).

¹⁸ Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*. 258

¹⁹ Miller, "A Love Affair with the Fair,"

Fair. From the technological innovations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to exhibits on “vehicles of yesteryear” in the mid-20th century, fair-goers could not get enough of the automobile. They were no longer simply interested in farmer’s produce or manufacturer’s wares but many were almost obsessed with the attraction of new automobiles.²⁰

Despite the popularity of the fair, and its attempts to keep pace with the changing times, it would not be able to last forever and compete with the consumption demands following the coming expansion of residency and industry in the surrounding area. From 1900 to 1949 Connecticut’s population more than doubled growing from 910,000 residents to 2,032,000.²¹ In the mid-1960s, in response to the growing population, the building of a major highway, Interstate 84, ended Danbury’s bucolic isolation, and helped the Danbury area become the fastest growing region in western Connecticut. From 1949 to 1970 the state population grew by another million people.²² Suddenly, Danbury became a stop on the major thoroughfare from New York City to Waterbury, a large city in western Connecticut, and Hartford, Connecticut’s capital. This was soon followed by an influx of white-collar firms, most notably the corporate giant Union Carbide, which began moving its 3,200 headquarters employees to the area in 1976. In 1981 the last year of the fair the new corporate headquarters of the Union Carbide Corporation was partially completed a few miles away. A new Hilton Hotel had recently opened and a Sheraton was in the planning stage. The Danbury Fair had become surrounded by buildings and industries with unrelated business appeals.²³ The neighboring towns of Brookfield, Newtown, Sherman, Bethel, New Fairfield, Redding, Bridgewater and New Milford rapidly transformed into bedroom communities for the new resident companies and for the booming Fairfield County. The sale of

²⁰ “The Danbury Fair,” *ConnecticutHistory.org*

²¹ United States Census Bureau, *State Population Estimates and Demographic Components of Change: 1900 to 1990 Total Population Estimates*, Accessed through census.gov

²² United States Census Bureau, *State Population Estimates and Demographic Components of Change*

²³ Richard L. Madden, “A Bittersweet Opening for Danbury State Fair,” *New York Times*, 5 Oct. 1981 <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/05/nyregion/a-bittersweet-opening-for-danbury-state-fair.html> (accessed 29 Oct. 2013).

the Danbury State Fairgrounds in 1981 and the development of the million-square foot shopping mall in 1986 represented the perfect symbol of Danbury's transformation from a dying agricultural society to a capitalistic one based on production and consumption.²⁴

In its last remaining decades the fair had converted from a competitive environment to one based on entertainment and historical education. Although the main attractions of the fair moved away from agriculture contests and displays to auto and horse racing the agricultural facilities still remained. In the 1970's they no longer held the importance to the farmers as they once did because the need to showcase their produce to increase customers was no longer essential. Instead the exhibits changed from being primarily competitive with one another to ones simply presenting educational experience for fair-goers reminding them of agricultural toils of the past. "The fair has changed over the years", said Arlene Yapple, who had been supervising the grange displays from 1945 - 1981, "from competition to education, although there are still some competitive events, such as the oxen pulls."²⁵ Pointing to a 320-pound squash grown in nearby New Fairfield, Miss Yapple said: "Many people have never seen anything like that grown. They might see it in the First National, or the Piggly-Wiggly, or Gristedes, but they've never seen it where it comes from."²⁶ The Danbury Fair's educational aspect had converted from one that once introduced new agricultural innovation to competing farmers to one that was reminiscent of past times.

Today, Connecticut is the country's twenty-ninth most populous state, with 3.4 million residents, yet it is ranked forty-eight in size by area. "The eight counties of southwestern Connecticut are also part of the New York metropolitan area, or Tri-State region. The Tri-State area is the most populated metropolitan area in the United States, with approximately twenty-two

²⁴ J Greg Robertson, "A Changing Danbury Retains its 'Beer and Pretzel' Flavor," 7 Mar. 1988, <http://search.proquest.com/pqrl/docview/195629066/141A4CF9AE52DB1EED9/2?accountid=9784> (accessed 29 Oct. 2013).

²⁵ Madden, "A Bittersweet Opening for Danbury State Fair."

²⁶ Madden, "A Bittersweet Opening for Danbury State Fair."

million people. It is also one of the most populated areas in the world. One out of every fifteen Americans resides in this region.”²⁷ With such high population densities agriculture no longer has room to play an important role in the area especially when the society is based on big business and capitalism. The fair has been replaced with a year-round extravaganza, the Danbury Fair mall, which opened in 1986. It's now the second-largest mall in the state and the fifth-largest in New England, with cars filling its parking lots every month.²⁸

Even with the loss of original agricultural values many people still miss the Danbury fair. "You kind of hate to see it die," said Linus Gilbert of Thomaston as he led his pair of Devon oxen - "Jerry" and "Terry" - to a water trough. "I don't see why they had to sell it, but that's their business."²⁹ Mr. Gilbert is 80 years old and attended his first fair in Danbury in 1917. "I've been coming here since I was 14 and I'm 40," said another fair-goer, Elbert Scofield of Bethel. "It's a damned shame," he added. "I love it. It's got a little bit of everything."³⁰ Despite its absence the Danbury Fair has left a lasting impression on many. "As old as I am, I can remember when I was 6 years old," Godfrey, 83, said. "I can remember the trolley taking us right to Backus Avenue. I can remember my mother packing our lunch in a shoe box. I can remember sitting in the Big Top, eating lunch with her."³¹ Many Danbury residents were so angered when the fair was replaced by a shopping mall that they vowed never to set foot inside the Danbury Fair Mall. Residents also said they miss the racetrack, complaining there's no longer anything to do in the city on Saturday nights. However, even with the initial resentment of some residents, the mall is a success providing more to the city in annual real state taxes than the fair ever could.³²

²⁷ Laura La Bella, *Connecticut Past and Present*, (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2011) pg. 6.

²⁸ Madden, "A Bittersweet Opening for Danbury State Fair."

²⁹ Madden, "A Bittersweet Opening for Danbury State Fair."

³⁰ Madden, "A Bittersweet Opening for Danbury State Fair."

³¹ Madden, "A Bittersweet Opening for Danbury State Fair."

³² Don Dzikowski, "Remembering the Danbury Fair," *Fairfield County Business Journal*, 22 Dec. 1997, <http://search.proquest.com/pqcentral/docview/216387546/140DFB057F77B26BD13/3?accountid=9784> (accessed 4 Nov. 2013).

All fairs in the Northeast no longer hold the traditional agricultural and historical values that they used to. However, they can still educate newer generations greatly about the importance of agriculture in the past and illuminate the connections our society had with the land we relied upon to survive. The Danbury Fair would still exist today except that it was located in a unique location, where the unfortunate increase in industry and consumerism made it way out of place. There are no more state agricultural fairs left in Connecticut but several popular town fairs. None of which are nearly as grand as the Danbury Fair, but they do not have to worry about being out-competed by industry because they are located in rural areas that still depict a country setting. If populations were to increase in these locales along with industry and businesses it is possible that these fairs disappear as well. Although agriculture does not maintain great importance to our New England society today, it formed the backbone of our nation many years ago. It is important to preserve the concepts, memories, and experiences of that time period so as to remember that we are only alive due to the sustenance provided to us by the Earth. Modern agricultural fairs can continue to greatly assist in this endeavor to preserve our past connection with the land, but only if they are permitted to endure.

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