

Goodhue County Agricultural Society and Mechanics Institute

The Goodhue County Fair

Back in 1859, a small group of county pioneers had a vision that Goodhue County needed a place to showcase their agricultural and homemaking activities. That vision became the Goodhue County Fair. The first 7 fairs were held in and near Red Wing. The Minnesota State Fair was even held in conjunction with the Goodhue County Fair in 1864. Later fairs were held in the center of the county at Hader for 3 years. Since then, the fairs have all been held in and around Zumbrota. Initially, fairs were held as street fairs in Zumbrota. In 1892, the fair moved to the S. B. Barteau farm northwest of Zumbrota. This site is now in the city's industrial park area along Jefferson Drive (Old Hwy 52), now known as the Barteau House B&B. After the 10 year lease was up, the fair again moved into Zumbrota as a street fair. In 1915, the present grounds of 16.37 acres north of Zumbrota were purchased for \$3,270. Finally, the Goodhue County Fair had a permanent place to call home.

The fairgrounds site was developed over the years. Two of the earliest buildings are still in use. One of the moments in history for the fair was in 1919, when the original grandstand collapsed. Full of people at the end of a horse race, people stood up stamping their feet when the whole works just caved right in. Only one injury was reported. That structure was replaced by another wooden grandstand that served the fair well until the current aluminum structures were installed. The current grandstands have been a huge improvement for spectator viewing and safety. The new track design has really improved the demolition derbies. The grandstand building itself, with restrooms, showers, dairy parlor, storage and utilities, remained until 2009. That year, the building was razed and a new building set over the same footprint. The new building, sometimes called the "Township Building", due to a funding partnership with many of the county's townships, was realized. The new building again includes updated restrooms, showers, new dairy parlor, new maintenance shop, and expanded exhibit and storage space.

Our fairgrounds was once host to the famous Zumbrota Covered Bridge for many years. It once was home to a conservation wild animal exhibit, and housed a variety of other exhibits over the years. The old Belvidere School, believed to be the oldest country schoolhouse in Goodhue County, has even found new life at the fair. The wall maps, stove, desks, and even the globe are all original. The school closed in 1959, and in 1966 the school was donated to the Zumbrota Covered Bridge Park, where it resided for 40 years. Over the years, the school suffered damage from occasional floods. Finally in 2006, the schoolhouse was relocated to the fairgrounds, where it will remain high and dry. Renovations help the young and old talk about life and education in a bygone era.

Harness racing on a half-mile track was one of the first real attractions on the grounds, and drew crowds until about 1940 when automobiles took over. Horses again are a part of our fair, with a horse arena, sponsored by 4-H and other horse organizations, available to be utilized by a growing 4-H horse program and others.

Our 4-H youth program, currently 3rd largest in the state, has been the mainstay since the early part of the 20th Century. Our barns have consistently been filled with livestock, and our 4-H Building seems to

be bursting at the seams with additional 4-H projects. From our fair, young people go on to compete at the Minnesota State Fair with some of the largest county contingents in BOTH livestock and general encampments.

The Goodhue County Fair incorporated as a stock organization in 1961. It is directed by a board of 15 volunteer county citizens. We are also supported by a Junior Fair Board, made up of active 4-H youth volunteers. Our county's Junior Board has existed for many years and is a model for other counties. Several of our current fair board "cut their teeth" on the Junior Board.

The fair has changed and diversified over the years to entertain, educate, and draw people of all ages with a broad range of interests. There is still a strong emphasis on animals and traditional 4-H projects, but entertainment and educational programs and events are the key to hosting a successful 5-day fair. The carnival and commercial exhibits attract fair-goers from the area. The quilt show has enjoyed a rebirth as more people practice that art and even more enjoy the beauty and artistry of their works.

Evening grandstand events now include the always-popular demolition derbies. The Johnny Holm Band continues to entertain us for over 25 years. Tractor pulls, ATV pulls, and truck pulls round out the grandstand line-up. Smoke, noise and steel always seem to attract fair-goers.

Food, food, and more food! This alone is a good reason to take the family out to the fair. Deep-fried cheese curds, American Dairy Association shakes and malts, brats with sauerkraut, cotton candy, foot-long hotdogs are among the carnival and traditional foods available.

The Beer Garden hosts live entertainment each night. Traditional and up-and-coming bands are included in the mix.

Our annual attendance for the 5-day fair is around 35,000, with weather playing a huge factor in the fair's success. The outlook for fair activities seems positive. We are a tradition and have entertainment, fun, and education for all. We are truly a family-friendly fair, with something for everyone, whether young or old, rural or urban.

Zumbrotta celebrated their 150th anniversary as a city in 2006. As a part of that celebration, we hosted the famous Budweiser Clydesdales during our fair that year, culminated with them included in a parade through town and back on the Sunday after our fair. In 2011, our fair will be celebrating its own 150th anniversary. Look for special events and activities for this celebration.

Presently, the expanded golf course and related housing subdivisions has really brought the city out to us. In years past, the fair was always outside the city, but it appears the city has come to the fairgrounds. In the future, we hope and expect our fair will still be a gathering place. It's the only county-wide happening that draws everyone to a place for neighbors to connect, old friends to greet each other, and all ages to walk the grounds and remember the past, while talking about the future. Couples meet at the fair, and recreate the classic story of "Brigadoon". The grounds light up like a city for the fair once a year, and then shut down until August rolls around again. It's a tradition begun in infancy, a place for a youngster's first carnival rides, farm animals, snow cones, and pronto pups. The

future will bring changes, fairs always evolve. We wonder what the changes will be, but we look forward for many more fairs in the years to come. Entertainment, fun, and education. Built on tradition, but changing for the future.

More information can be found in the books, "Zumbrota, the First 100 Years", "Till the Cows Come Home", and "Bailey's Folly". Also area information can be found on www.zumbrota.com, and through various historical societies with the county.