

POSTED: Sunday, Aug. 08, 2010

As Lynden's fair turns 100, farming still takes center stage

DAVE GALLAGHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Whether it's judging the strongest livestock, the biggest potato or the best berry jam, there's a lot about the Northwest Washington Fair that hasn't changed in the past 100 years.

Agriculture at this year's fair Aug. 16-21 is one aspect that would be quite recognizable to attendees of the first fair in 1911, even though farming itself is now different, according to Troy Luginbill, director at the Lynden Pioneer Museum who regularly gives presentations about Whatcom County's agriculture history.

"Oddly enough, the only thing that's really changed over the years is the rides and the increase in the number of vendors selling stuff," Luginbill said of the fair, noting the increase in items for sale can be tied to the increase in disposable income for today's families.



LYNDEN PIONEER MUSEUM | FOR THE HERALD - In this 1957 photo from the Lynden Pioneers Museum, Jim Bouvendam uses a team of horses to plow a field in Lynden.

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As the Northwest Washington Fair celebrates its centennial later this month, agriculture at today's fair serves as a reminder of how important it was to the development of Whatcom County, including the towns, the roads and the industries that followed.

"Agriculture is what built Whatcom County, and it continues to be a big part of today's economy," Luginbill said. "If we didn't have agriculture, this place would be more like rural Alaska."

AGRICULTURE'S ROLE AT THE FIRST FAIR

As white settlers came to Whatcom County in the mid-19th century, agriculture started out as subsistence farming to supplement whatever could be collected through hunting and gathering. It was a time when farmers were figuring out what could grow in this area.

Luginbill estimates that by the 1880s, farmers were able to grow enough crops to move beyond the subsistence phase and start developing a local market. Surplus crops were starting to be sold, putting money in farmers' pockets.

It was a crucial period in the development of Whatcom County because surplus crops meant more demand for labor, Luginbill said. Given the technology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, harvesting was very labor intensive, with everything needing to be hand-picked quickly before it rotted.

"At this point, people have to be able to work together to get the harvest completed, so you have to build a community," Luginbill said.

With communities developing and technological improvements on the farm, agriculture flourished. Around 1910 Whatcom County's surplus had reached a point where farmers could begin selling outside the area to larger communities along the West Coast. With this kind of success, farmers had the luxury of getting their competitive juices flowing, talking about who could grow the best product. What better way to decide than an annual community gathering?

"The fair illustrates not only the cooperative venture of agriculture, but the competitive nature of humans," Luginbill said.

It was a diverse assortment of products Whatcom County farmers were producing in the first years of the fair. Daffodils, tulips, eggs, milk, berries, peas and flax were among the offerings from Whatcom County farms said Debbie VanderVeen, whose family operates Veen Huizen Farms near Everson.

"You can still see the daffodils along Bender Road and chicken coops that were converted into homes," VanderVeen said.

Flax was one of the first crops sold for use beyond the region for something other than food consumption. At the time it could be used for linoleum, a popular new product the government decided was important enough to start subsidizing, Luginbill said.

"It was a great floor covering for homes, making it easier to wipe up spills," Luginbill said. "Instead of importing it from other countries, the government had an interest in having flax grown in the U.S."

Tulips also became a popular product locally in the 1920s. It was a flower Europeans in particular enjoyed, but Europe tulip growers were recovering from the damage done in World War I. This allowed the U.S. to enter the market.

The Great Depression hurt Whatcom's attempts to get into the global market, but since the area still had a diversified agriculture industry, it was able to focus on a local market strategy again.

"No one had much money at the time, but farmers were able to grow food to make it through the Depression," Luginbill said.

POST-WAR CHANGES

With the arrival of World War II, the United States began ramping up food production, whether it was Victory gardens or supplying dried milk. Luginbill believes this ramping up led to the next stage of agriculture - specialization. In the 1940s and 1950s Whatcom County agriculture had tremendous growth in poultry egg production and dairy. What's now the Fairway Center in Lynden was once a huge poultry farm, and Washington state was one of the top egg producers in the U.S.

VanderVeen said improvements in refrigeration also helped expand dairy production. Keeping the milk cool was a big deal in terms of transportation, creating opportunities to tap into urban markets.

The fair reflected some of this post-war change. Poultry had a huge exhibit barn. In 1956 the Whatcom Dairy Wives (later to become the Whatcom Dairy Women) started, creating fair favorites such as berry/milk smoothies and later the ice cream sandwich affectionately known as the Moo-wich.

By the 1960s egg production in Whatcom County began to decline as the market diversified, technology changed and other states began investing more in the industry.

One area that didn't bounce back as strong in Whatcom County as before the Depression was tulip production. Luginbill said one factor was climate: Whatcom County has experienced a temperature drop of 2 degrees in the spring over the decades, resulting in the tulips blooming slightly later than even Skagit County. In the competitive tulip market, earlier is better; arriving at the market later meant dealing with dropping demand and prices.

Much of the specialization was influenced by the government through subsidies, often helping farmers bridge the gap of the market price versus the cost of production. That specialization still plays a big role in agriculture: According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture report for 2007, only 1.2 percent of the total market value is sold directly from the farm to individuals for human consumption.

One aspect of agriculture that has flourished in recent decades is berries, particularly raspberries. Berries are relatively easy to grow in this area but didn't really become popular until the 1980s. That was also around the time Korvan Industries (later to become Oxbo) revolutionized mechanical harvesting of berries locally, leading to increased production. Last year 58.5 million pounds of raspberries were harvested in Whatcom County, making this area one of the top production places in the world.

"The mechanical harvester really opened the door for the raspberry industry in Whatcom County," said Henry Bierlink, executive director of the Washington Red Raspberry Commission. The growth of the raspberry industry was largely market driven in the U.S.; it didn't have the government influence seen in some other aspects of agriculture.

Today dairy remains the biggest part of Whatcom County agriculture, followed by berry and fruit production. In 2007 the value of the agriculture products coming out of Whatcom County farms topped \$326.4 million, up from \$287.9 million five years earlier.

Even with the technology used on today's farms, agriculture remains a labor-intensive endeavor, and the fair is a reflection of that hard work. It's something taught to the next generation, and the fair is an important part of educating future farmers, through the experience of growing a product or handling livestock, VanderVeen said. It's also a year-round project, particularly for raising animals to be judged.

"It is a lifestyle, not a career, and the fair becomes a part of that lifestyle," VanderVeen said. "The day after the fair you start to get ready for the next fair. It really gets in your blood."

WHAT WHATCOM PRODUCES TODAY

The market value of the top Whatcom County agriculture products, according to the USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture and compiled by Whatcom Farm Friends:

Dairy: \$186.5 million.

Fruits, tree nuts & berries: \$66.8 million.

Cattle, calves: \$24.1 million.

Nursery/greenhouse: \$16.7 million.

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Poultry, eggs: \$11.5 million.

Vegetables: \$10 million.

Other: \$10.9 million.

AGRICULTURE IN 1910

Lynden was, and still is, an agricultural center. While detailed 1910 census data on agriculture in Lynden isn't available, the data is for the whole county. Following are a few statistics from 1910 on Whatcom County agriculture:

- The number of farms was 2,413 in 1910, an increase of 91 percent over a decade earlier. In 2007 there were 1,483 farms.
- The acreage of farmland was 145,747 in 1910, an increase of 22 percent from a decade before. In 2007 there were 102,584 acres of farmland.
- The average farm size was 60.4 acres in 1910.
- Only 3.7 percent of farm owners were non-white; most people in the county were white.
- 44 percent of farm owners were foreign born.
- Number of acres for Whatcom County raspberries and loganberries in 1910: 28. Number of acres of raspberries in 2007: 8,200.
- The value of all farmland increased 323.6 percent over the decade, showing great competition for farmland.
- Farmland in Whatcom County averaged \$73.05 an acre, while it was \$117.16 an acre in Skagit County and \$84.06 an acre in Snohomish County.
- For farms operated by owners, 63 percent of them reported no mortgage debt and 34 percent had mortgage debt. There were no records on the rest.
- Number of dairy cows in 1910: 1,549. In 2007: 48,964.
- Whatcom County farms had 20,091 cattle, 6,993 swine, 6,592 sheep, 4,776 horses, 1,968 bee colonies, 124 goats, 28 mules and 99,982 poultry.

SOURCES: U.S. Census, USDA Agriculture Census