

Tanana Valley State Fair History

Founded in 1924, the Tanana Valley State Fair is the oldest fair in the state of Alaska. Its creation was the result of the vision of George W. Gasser, a longtime “experimenter and educator,” and Harry Badger, a local homesteader and farmer. The Tanana Valley Fair Association was organized and incorporated on July 7, 1924. The incorporation of TVSFA as a non-profit organization was restated in 1993.

There had been earlier fairs in the area. According to TVFA President G.W. Gasser’s remarks in the 1950 Official Premium List of the Tanana Valley Fair, a reference was made to those fairs in an old publication.

“In a Fairbanks booklet published in 1915 is a picture folder of a wonderful display of garden and field produce. Underneath is the caption: ‘Some of the exhibits at the fifth annual Tanana Valley Fair held in Fairbanks, 1915.’”

The first Tanana Valley Fair of the Tanana Valley Fair Association was held September 11-13, 1924, downtown at the Auditorium in the Moose Hall, near the old Masonic Temple on First Avenue. Through 1950 the Tanana Valley Fair was held in several locations in downtown Fairbanks, most notable at the Masonic Temple and Fairbanks High School.

In 1952, that all changed, according to “History of the Tanana Valley Fair Grounds” printed in the 1953 Official Premium List of the Twenty-Second Tanana Valley Fair.

“On March 22, 1952 a group of people interested in reviving the Tanana Valley Fair met ... [and] were unified on one thought ... in 1952 there would be a fair, bigger and better than ever.... In April some one hundred people met ... and elected a Board of Directors. In June, the board secured forty acres of land from the University of Alaska on a ten year lease...located on the College Road next to the KFRB transmitter... A master plan was drawn up ...to use as a guide in the development of the forty acres. The plot includes a plan for an amphitheatre, ball park, and skating rink, an extensive picnic area, bowling green, playground, besides permanent buildings for exhibits and inside entertainment at the annual fair.”

With the help of many organizations and companies in the Fairbanks area, the land was cleared, two wells were dug, picnic tables were donated, large pavilions, a permanent concession booth and band stand were built, and tents were loaned for exhibit displays. A permanent “very modern” concrete block office building was built and donated to T.V.S.A. by Curley’s Construction and Fixture Company. Golden Valley Electric Company placed service and wiring wherever needed. Even though carpenters and electricians were still hard at work the morning of August 21, the gates opened to the public at 7pm that evening. Over the decades, several organizations and companies have built and donated buildings on the Fairgrounds.

Shares of stock in the Association were sold for \$5 apiece, and there were 215 shareholders by the end of 1952.

The 1952 fair was notable on several points. The Tanana Valley Fair finally had a permanent home to call their own. It was the first Fair that had a theme (“Dedication to George Gasser and Harry Badger”) and it was the first time the Fair was four days long. (It was scheduled from August 21-23, but was held over one more day due to large demand). 6000 people attended that fair

Currently the Fairgrounds encompass 100 acres, the additional 60 acres acquired from the University of Alaska Land Trust.

Over the years the length of the fair has increased from 3 days in 1924 to the current 9 day fair.

Now for some Not So Frequently Asked About information and trivia of the Tanana Valley State Fair.

Between 1924 and 2010, there have been 79 Tanana Valley Fairs. The Fair has been cancelled eight times and postponed once. It was cancelled in 1932 and 1934, due to the Great Depression, 1942-46, due to WWII, and 1951. In 1967 the Fair was postponed until Sept 15-17, because of a little thing called the Flood.

In the early years of Alaskan Statehood, the Governor of Alaska would designate a fair the Official Alaska State Fair. Traditionally in even-numbered years the Tanana Valley Fair was known as the [Year] Alaska State Fair; in odd-numbered years the fair in Palmer was named the Alaska State Fair. In 1984, saluting the 25th Anniversary of Alaskan Statehood, both the fairs were called the Alaska State Fair. In 1985, the Tanana Valley State Fair became the permanent name of the fair in the Tanana Valley.

The very popular “punny” themes for the Fair started in 1982, with “Fun for You in ’82.” In 1990, pun-inspired themes became a regular feature with “Lettuce Entertain Ewe,” and for the most part have continued to this day.

Always setting the annual date of the fair to start on the first Friday of August only began in 1993. The earliest Fairs were actually in September, and starting in 1929, the last weekend in August. During the 1950’s the fair was held primarily during the middle part of August.

The 1953 Tanana Valley Fair was noted for both the highest attendance to date – 10,000 visitors, and the torrential rains on the last day of the Fair.

Many of competitive exhibits that are included in the current volume of the Exhibitor’s Guide were found in the Official Premium Lists of the Fair in the 1920’s.

One of the more unusual exhibits involved foxes: live foxes were listed under Livestock, Fur Bearing Animals, in Division C, and further in the same Premium List, in Division K, Furs, there were classes for fox skins. These Divisions continued through the 1930’s.

As early as 1926, “farm products exhibited at the Fair and not ordered returned by the owner [were to] be sold at auction and the proceeds turned into the Fair fund.” In later years, exhibitors were encouraged to bring additional produce to sell at market. In 1977 the Cooperative Extension Service at the University of Alaska proposed a formal farmer’s market be set up at the front entrance of the Fairgrounds. The first Tanana Valley Farmer’s Market opened on July 15, 1978. The Tanana Valley Farmer’s Market was incorporated in 1986. The Farmer’s Market moved off the fairgrounds to its own property in 2005.

The First Exhibitor’s Guide was available online in 2007. In an effort to be fiscally responsible, and to minimize the Fair’s carbon footprint, the last hard-copy Exhibitor’s Guide was printed in 2008.

Some of the oldest ongoing competitions at the Fair, dating back to at least 1926 (the Third Annual Fair of the Tanana Valley Fair Association) include the Baby Show, the Farm and Garden Display, Most Attractively Decorated Advertising [Commercial] Booth, and of course, the biggest cabbage.

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