

NORTH TEXAS STATE FAIR AND RODEO

*Historical Narrative researched and written by Kim Wendt for
Texas Historical Commission Historical Marker application, Denton County*

I. CONTEXT

Established in 1857, Denton is the county seat of Denton County, named for John B. Denton, a pioneer preacher and lawyer who was killed in an Indian fight in 1841. For a decade, Denton was on the northeast Texas frontier. Cattle and horses ranged on the unfenced prairies. Residents were engaged in ranching and subsistence farming. John S. Chisum, who became the one of the most famous cattleman in the West, operated his first ranch in Denton County. ¹

As early as 1852, Texans began to embrace the festive and competitive atmosphere of the fair to celebrate their farming and ranching successes.² The first recorded fair in the Denton area, the Denton County Blooded Stock and Fair, opened on October 15, 1885, and featured running and trotting races.³ On September 6, 1890, stockholders of the Denton County Blooded Stock Association met at the office of Col. T. W. Abney to discuss the sale of the fair grounds to J.A. Carroll, trustee for the benefit of the stockholders. ⁴ The fair property was divided into lots and sold by the members. The Denton County Blooded Stock and Fair was revived in the mid-1890s, and incorporated in 1896 with officers J. W. Medlin, W. H. Pierce, W. A. Miller, W. P. Parker, M.S. Stout, J. Colt, and Dr. J. P. Blount presiding.⁵

Throughout the late 1800s, local area fairs continued to recognize local competitors with championship premiums for the livestock and crops. In 1899, Mr. J. W. Medlin, organizer, manager and owner of the bulk of the stock of the Denton County Fair Association said, “Our fair is five year old. For two or three years it was hard to keep its head above water, but I am proud to say that I believe it is now the greatest county fair, not only in Texas, but in the entire

south.”⁶ Mr. Medlin went on to boast of the many entries from the Denton fair that were competitive at the State Fair in Dallas, proving the success of agricultural activities in Denton County.

In September of 1900, Secretary W. E. Smoot secured the Attorney General of Texas, The Honorable Tom Smith, to present the opening remarks at the sixth annual Denton County Blooded Stock and Fair. The Hon. Mr. Smith spoke at length about the growth and progress of the fair and its importance to the area. He bragged that a mill from Denton County won first prize at the Paris exposition in a worldwide competition.⁷ Alliance Milling Company (later known as Morrison Milling Company) won the First Prize Gold Medal for wheat flour at the 1900 Paris International Exposition.⁸

In that same year, the outlaw Frank James approached Secretary Smoot regarding serving as a starter for the races at the fair. Although Frank James ultimately did not start the Denton race, the outlaw did return to Texas to serve as starter for the races at the Texas State Fair in Dallas later that year.⁹ In 1902, the horse racetrack at the Denton fairgrounds was said to be one of the fastest in the state.¹⁰

In 1903, the association voted to sell all the lumber and improvements on the fairgrounds, valued at between \$3,000 and \$4,000; and the real estate, consisting of forty lots, valued at about \$10,000.¹¹

A restructured Denton County Fair, incorporated by Sanger, was held in that town from 1915-1917.¹²

II. OVERVIEW

The North Texas State Fair, as it is known today, began as the Denton County Fair organized by the Denton County Fair Association. The fair was inaugurated in 1928¹³ and officially chartered in 1930.¹⁴

However, in the early 1920s, civic groups in Denton, spearheaded by the local women's clubs, were searching for sites for a city park and fair grounds. College of Industrial Arts (CIA) President C. F. Bralley suggested Quakertown as the perfect location.¹⁵ Quakertown was a thriving black community "nestled at the foot of the hill along the bank of Pecan Creek" just below the College of Industrial Arts (now Texas Woman's University), an all-white woman's college. The community had begun in the 1870s and had grown to a population of almost 60 families by 1921.¹⁶

In January 1921, a petition went out calling for a bond election to purchase the Quakertown property for a city park. The election was held April 5, 1921 and of the 607 votes cast, 367 were for the creation of the park and 240 were against. With very little say, the residents of Quakertown had lost their neighborhood and the fair had a more permanent home.¹⁷ The festivals resumed and the Denton Chamber of Commerce began to partner with fair officials.

In 1923 and 1924, the livestock and agricultural exhibits were shown under tents and sheds erected especially for the fair. The entertainment program was provided by the city's two universities.¹⁸

In 1930, the Denton County Fair Association under the management of Dr. Jack Skiles (1891-1957), arranged for new fairgrounds, a tract of about 13 acres of land immediately east of the Long and King Wholesale Company building on East Hickory Street¹⁹

The fair association was incorporated on May 2, 1930 by the Secretary of the State of Texas with Mr. Hal G. Rylander serving as president.²⁰ According to the document, the purpose of this new organization, the Denton County Agricultural Fair Association, was “encouragement of agriculture and horticulture by associations for the maintenance of public fairs and exhibitions of stock and farm products.”²¹

Formal organization and a permanent home allowed the fair to grow. In 1931, the fair was a five-day affair including entertainment by the North Texas Teacher’s College band and had large entries in both the livestock and agricultural departments. The 1935 fair included entertainment by the Floyd Graham’s Teachers College Band, the Lightcrust Doughboys from Fort Worth, John E. Lawhon’s Denton High School Band and W. Lee O’Daniels Band from Fort Worth.²²

Officers of the County Fair Association in 1935 were W. S. Long, president, and Otis L. Fowler (1896-1968), secretary.²³ Mr. Fowler was a long-time manager/secretary of the chamber and served as president of fair in 1939.

The Denton fair was held continuously until 1942. After that, the Denton County Fair was discontinued, and the Ponder Rodeo, another county favorite, was cancelled. The rodeo arena and stock pens were dismantled in Ponder and brought to the Denton fairgrounds on Exposition Street, east of the railroad tracks.²⁴ The fair resumed in 1946 after the war, but increased business activities in the eastern part of the city where the grounds were located forced officials to cancel the 1947 and 1948 fairs because of lack of adequate parking space.²⁵

According to a warranty deed, Dr. W.C. Kimbrough (1875-1952), a pioneer Denton physician, sold the association twenty-two acres of land in northeast Denton on April 28, 1948 for \$5.00.²⁶ This parcel of land was located north of Highway 24 (now known as University

Drive) on Beaumont Street (now known as Carroll Boulevard). Fine horses, fat calves, jellies, jams and quilts would once again fill the fairgrounds as people could gather to see the best of Denton's agricultural and pioneer heritage.²⁷ (This would become the permanent home of the North Texas State Fair beginning in 1948. It is still the current location as of 2010.)

The Denton County Fair Grounds were dedicated, and Dr. W. C. Kimbrough honored, on opening day of the 1949 fair.²⁸ Denton civic leaders, including Dr. Skiles, Dr. Kimbrough and Mr. Fowler, long-time leader of the Denton Chamber of Commerce, played an integral part in keeping the fair solvent while civic groups such as the Kiwanis, Rotary, Optimist and Lions clubs, as well as local FFA, FHA and 4-H groups benefited from utilizing the fair grounds for community activities.

For many years, the annual fair celebration was opened with a parade. In 1923, the *Dallas Morning News* reported the "fair will open with a parade Wednesday morning at 10 o'clock."²⁹ In later articles, the *Dallas Morning News* reported that the 1938 and 1939 parades were huge during those years. According to association records, the first documented record of the fair parade was in 1956. Serving on the 1956 parade committee were Doc Pitner, Joe Evans and Jack Vanderhoff.³⁰ James Roden, former president and executive director of the association, said that the "fair parade was held in 1968 when he arrived in Denton, and has been held annually since that year."³¹ In 1956, fair admission was 10 cents for children and 25 cents for adults.³²

On May 24, 1956, a loan was made to the fair association from First State Bank of Denton for up to \$9,000 to build an exhibit building on the grounds according to an official document which was signed by Jack Vanderhoff, secretary. W.C. Orr was charged with exhibits for the new building.³³

In 1958, the Denton County Agricultural Fair Association stockholders approved a vote to change the name to better reflect the regional effect of the fair on the north Texas area. Original ballots show stakeholders placed 19 votes to approve the name “North Texas Fair Assn.,” with 5 votes to retain “Denton County Fair Assn.”³⁴ Shortly after the vote, the association was approached by the Shetland Pony Association regarding a significant donation. To be eligible, the “county” fair had to be a “state’ fair. The vote was amended to change the name to North Texas *State* Fair. The Shetland Pony Association donated funds to build the original building that is now part of the fair office, as well as two cattle barns.³⁵ In 1959, a concession stand was erected near the rodeo arena to allow local civic organizations to raise funds during the fair.³⁶

The oldest building on the grounds, Fair Hall, was on the property at the time that Dr. Kimbrough sold the land for \$5.00 to the fair association in 1948. The building had originally been used at the World War II German prisoner of war camp site at Camp Howze, an infantry training facility outside of Gainesville, Cook County. When the camp had been dismantled in 1942, Denton County acquired the building and located it on the Kimbrough tract of land to use for a GI school. Denton County donated the building, a desk, a wooden file cabinet and four chairs to the fair association at the time of the Kimbrough sale.³⁷

On June 16, 1981, under the leadership of President James Roden, the board voted to amend the original Articles of Incorporation to officially change the name of the corporation from Denton County Agricultural Fair Association to North Texas State Fair Association.³⁸ Mr. Roden was the first paid executive director and served in this position from 1983 to January 2000. Prior to this time, he had been elected president of the Denton County Agricultural Fair Association (changed to North Texas State Fair Association in 1981) and held this position from

1973 to 1983. He was succeeded by the late Ken Burdick (1943-2007) who served as executive director from 1999 to 2005.³⁹ After many years of involvement with the fair rodeo, Glenn Carlton was named executive director in 2005 and still serves today.

In 1989, the North Texas State Fair Association began to move beyond the local cowboy competition and brought the first Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) rodeo to the fair.⁴⁰ Multiple world champion cowboy Roy Cooper was a member of the first group of PRCA professional cowboys to compete at the fair. Soon after, association members began to market the North Texas State Fair *and Rodeo* to promote the addition of the professional rodeo activities.

On August 30, 1996, the association under the leadership of Mr. Roden purchased an additional 11.503 acres from Strata Properties for \$90,000. Infinity Strata Edition, Lot 11C, Block 1.⁴¹

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The fair has been a time honored western tradition in the North Texas region since the late 1800s. Beginning in 1928 and incorporated in 1930, the fair has continued to showcase the area's farming heritage. At one time allowing the agricultural community of Denton to gather for festivities, social activities, and contests, it continues to draw more than 150,000 people annually generating almost \$6,000,000 in economic activity in Denton County.⁴² The fair is held in the heart of Denton just east of Interstate 35 East, a major north south artery for the state.

The North Texas State Fair is a member of the International Association of Fairs and Expositions (IAFE), as well as the Texas Association of Fairs and Events (TAFE). The fair received the TAFE organization's Award of Excellence in 2008 and 2009.⁴³ In addition, the fair

is a member of the Denton Chamber of Commerce, hosting an annual mixer each August before opening day of the fair.

Fairs and rodeos are deeply engrained in the fabric of Americans struggling to keep their farming and ranching heritage alive. The North Texas State Fair is in a unique position of having a significant agricultural base and booming population to sustain a successful annual fair and rodeo. ⁴⁴ Dreams of moving to a 124-acre plot off South Locust Street near Denia Park and building a \$10 million complex with a 7,000 seat coliseum crumbled in 1986 when fair officials failed to sell the property.⁴⁵ Continued growth since that time has current board members cooperating with city officials and the Denton Chamber of Commerce to explore options for expansion in the near future.

Legendary cowboys like long-time Denton resident and 2010 Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame inductee Weldon Burgoon began their careers at the North Texas State Fair. Weldon began competing against senior ropers in 1941 at age eleven at the Denton County Fair before joining the Professional Cowboy and Rodeo Association (PRCA) and competing professionally.⁴⁶ He retired to Denton to raise his family and give back to the community who gave him his start, serving fourteen years as the rodeo chairman for the fair.

Denton continues to embrace its strong agricultural roots and pioneer heritage, celebrating its farming and ranching past, present and future. The fair is a community event hosted each year with assistance by the Chamber of Commerce, local businesses and the agriculture extension office. Local community service groups use the fair as an avenue to raise funds for their organization, while the association gives back by allowing them to hold events and meetings on the grounds during the off season.

For more than 80 years the North Texas State Fair has persevered through the Great Depression, war, recession, urbanization and industrialization and continues to showcase the agricultural roots of Denton. Proceeds from the fair continue the legacy by reinvesting proceeds into the programs, facilities and scholarships for youth participating in agricultural activities. The scholarship program was initiated by Bobby “Bob” Calvin Powers (1932 - 1995), local certified public accountant (CPA) and long-time board member and former treasurer of the fair.⁴⁷ A bronze plaque honoring Mr. Powers was placed on the fair’s administrative building, which was named the Bob C. Powers Administration Building in 1995. The fair now offers three scholarship opportunities for area youth. The Bob C. Powers Scholarship began in 1996 to honor Powers after his death.⁴⁸ The North Texas State Fair Association Scholarship was created in 2000, followed by the Continuing Education Scholarship in 2008.

The North Texas State Fair is an integral part of the culture and charm of the North Texas area and a tradition for its residents. Revitalizing the cowboy way isn’t just about nostalgia for the folks around Denton. It is about survival, growing crops and running ranches on less and less land. And making sure our future...the youth of Denton County...stay involved in agriculture.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

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