

“COVID-19 CANCELS THE OKLAHOMA STATE FAIR” (June 28, 2020)

One of the unanticipated consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic that affected many, including my husband and I, was the announcement on local news stations (June 26, 2020) that the Oklahoma State Fair in Oklahoma City was cancelled for 2020. The report on the news indicated that this closure would cost Oklahoma City (OKC) over \$100 Million. And this amount does not include the financial losses by all the vendors and commercial exhibitionists at the fair. The vendors come from far and wide to attend the fair, a large number from Oklahoma but from other states as well.

In addition to the financial losses to the vendors and to OKC, there are other types of losses to people involved in the farm animal stock shows. Student members of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) and the 4-H groups work for as much as a year taking care of their show animals – they clean, fluff, trim, brush, polish, oil, and spend hours every day training their animals for the “stock show” at the fair. They feed them special food and care for their every need, dreaming of winning a First Place Ribbon or maybe even a Championship Trophy at the State Fair. Some of the kids even sleep near their animal’s stalls during the fair. The Oklahoma State Fair stock shows include a large variety of animals – such as chickens, goats, sheep, swine, beef cattle, and dairy cattle. There are also various open class horse shows and working dog shows. And for families who breed these animals on their farms, the stock shows at the fair are critical for them to show the quality of their breeding stock or working stock. If their animals show well, it helps them to obtain premium prices when selling their breeding stock to other farms. This will be a large loss to these farm people, especially to all the youth who planned to participate in the stock shows and now see a year of all their hard work and dreams going down the drain.

HISTORY OF THE STATE FAIR OF OKLAHOMA

The first “state” fair in Oklahoma City occurred in 1889, a few months after the most well-known “Land Run of 1889, while Oklahoma was still two territories plus an area called No Man’s Land – Oklahoma Territory encompassed most of the western half of Oklahoma including Oklahoma City and Indian Territory encompassed most of the eastern half. No Man’s Land included the area now known as the Oklahoma “Panhandle”. When Oklahoma became a state, it included all three of these areas on November 16, 1907. Our first State Capitol was in Guthrie and it was later moved to Oklahoma City. On Statehood Day in Guthrie, there was a mock wedding of a Cowboy and an Indian Maiden to honor the joining of these territories into one state. All Oklahoma students take an Oklahoma History class in high school. Most of our universities also have classes in Oklahoma History.

The State Fair of Oklahoma has gone through several changes over the years. Originally it was held on the east side of OKC, but in the 1950’s it was moved to its present location on the west side of OKC. It has grown in size and many of the rides and events have changed. It had a racetrack that was first used for horse racing and later used for auto races and tractor pulls. The arena is no longer there. It had an elevated monorail that I rode on as a child. It is no longer there. It had a “space” needle that went high in the air, but it is no longer there. There have been new buildings added over the years with the most recent one being the nearly 6.5-acre Bennett Event Center. Many of the oldest buildings are likely to be removed with this addition.

The Oklahoma State Fair has had its financial ups and downs, but it has continued every year, through World War I, through the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, and even through the Depression Era without interruption. It also

continued through most of World War II, other than in 1945 at the war's end. In 1945, the "U.S. War Committee on Conventions" ordered Oklahoma to cancel their State Fair for the first time since it began. However, Oklahoma came back and the fair has continued every year until 2020 and Covid-19. It will be the first time that Oklahoma City will have voluntarily shutdown the fair since its inception. For Oklahoma City, this is an historical event, although a sad one.

OUR TYPICAL DAY AT THE OK STATE FAIR

My husband and I have gone to the fair together since before we were married over 38 years ago. When we were younger, we would buy season passes so that we could save money when we attended the fair on several different days. I usually arranged my vacation time at work so that we could attend the fair without interruption or interference. Other people I worked with went to the lake, to Disney World, or to other vacation spots over the summer, but we waited and went to the fair in September. It was one of the highlights of our year. However, as we have aged, we are unable to attend the fair more than once or twice in a season due to what seems like too many miles of walking. But we enjoy it all the same.

When we first enter the fair, it is the smells of the cotton candy, corndogs, corn on the cob, polish sausage sandwiches, cinnamon rolls, and other foods that let you know you have arrived at the fair. It is a smell all its own. One of our first stops will be at a vendor who sells polish sausage sandwiches with grilled peppers and onions. We have gone to the same vendor for many years. Although we do not know his name, we know him by sight, and he remembers us. He and three or four of his brothers run food stands at the fair. He sells sausage sandwiches and his brothers sell grilled corn on the cob at two stands and spicy chicken at another. The brothers are all from Florida. They travel to several states in their "State Fair" circuit before arriving here in OKC. The Oklahoma State Fair is the last stop they make before heading home for the season. The brothers do not go to the Texas State Fair, which is in October soon after the Oklahoma State Fair in OKC. I now wonder how they are doing when they depend on this income to last them the rest of the year until the season begins again.

After we eat our sandwiches, we walk down the midway to see if there are any new rides or games that interest us. Although we seldom ride any of the rides or play any of the games, we love to discuss how scary a ride would be or how hard a game would be to win. We then go through the exhibition halls to see what is new and different, gathering free yardsticks, pins, and other "giveaway" items along the way that we really do not need. We talk to the vendors and we sometimes buy a few things. Then, we go around to see the outside exhibits, eat more fair food, and watch all the people. My husband likes to look at the tractors and the new pickups. We look at storage buildings, we watch musical groups, and we see various interesting exhibits and shows. And we sometimes see friends, relatives, or neighbors and we may stop to speak to them for a while. After walking around some of the outside exhibits, we typically ride the free train, which circles the outlying parts of the fair and passes by all the many entry gates. We see what we can see from the train and we enjoy the ride. If we are getting tired, we may make more than one circle just to see the sights some more but mostly to rest our feet. On one circle, we usually get off near the Western Stage and watch some of the many shows and talk to some of the craftsmen. After this, we catch the train again and ride it across the fair to the animal exhibits and stock shows. We look at the some of the stock and watch some of the shows, but we always wind up at the Horse Show Arena. Here, we may stay for an hour or we may stay for two or three hours, depending on what show event is occurring. Our favorite shows, which are not always at the fair, are the Draft Horse Pulls and the Cutting Horse Shows, but we will watch any of the horse shows.

By this time, we have been at the fair for many hours. Our feet and legs are sore and tired, and we still have a relatively long walk to reach our vehicle. The Horse Barn is somewhat close to the gate we usually enter, maybe within a quarter mile, which seems close when considering the space of the entire fair. Then we have about that much further to walk to reach the pickup from the gate. As we drive home, we talk about what we saw, what we experienced, what changed this year, what did not change, and what should have changed. And we both know that we have enjoyed another day in another year at the State Fair of Oklahoma. We will miss the fair.

Sharon Annesley
Blanchard, OK 73010

Sources of Information:

<https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=ST021>

<https://okstatefair.com/uploads//osf-2020fairannouncement.pdf>

<https://oklahoman.com/article/2842377/10-decades-of-the-oklahoma-state-fair>

<https://statefairparkokc.com/building/71/details>

<https://www.visitokc.com/articles/post/bennett-event-center-opens-at-state-fair-park/>