

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Now it's time for the Annual Barnstable Fair. The summer's nearly half-gone and Dog Days are upon us. These are the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer we've all looked forward to through the long cold winter. These are Barnstable Fair days.

It's more than half-a-century since I was taken to my first Barnstable Fair. In those days the fair was held over in Barnstable Village north of the King's Highway in the huge field overlooking the Barnstable marshes, the harbor, and the windswept dunes of Sandy Neck.

Then as now it was an agricultural fair, exhibiting all sorts of farm animals and implements, farm products and home crafts; then as now it attracted people from all over the county, for the fair is, has always been a country-wide effort, sponsored by the Barnstable County Agricultural Society.

Fifty years ago Barnstable County was far less suburban, far more agrarian. Farms occupied much of the Cape where now sprout houses instead of hay. Flocks of sheep moved like gray and white shadows of clouds over the broad meadows bordering Cape Cod Bay.

Cows stood patiently in pastures, tails to the wind, watered at the meandering fresh water streams that wore their ways through the marshes and emptied into the sea.

Pigs rooted and grunted in the sty, fattening through the summers for fall butchering. Goats roamed as far as their tethers allowed. Hens scratched and cackled, roosters crowed and wing-clipped geese honked and hissed at the edges of ponds.

Horses were commonplace. Many people still depended upon horses for transportation and working the land. Horses tugged the plows that turned the soil each spring; horses drew the wagons that gathered the harvests, delivered vegetables to market, carried cordwood from the forests to sheds for storage against the coming winter.

Horses still pulled the buggies people used for traveling to town, church, Town Meeting, visits to neighbors and relatives, and to the Barnstable Fair.

Of course there were some engine-powered tractors and there were automobiles as well. The Model-T Ford was equally as common as the horse-drawn vehicle. And almost as reliable. People still advised the automobiliest sweating at changing a tire along the roadside, "Get a horse!" as they clip-clopped past.

The fair at the old Fair Grounds in Barnstable offered many of the same attractions the modern one does. There were the horse-pulls, the prize-winning sheep, goats, and swine. There were also horseraces, an attraction no longer scheduled, and there was the Midway with rides for all who had the pennies.

The Merry-Go-Round, its calliope wailing more or less musically, attracted every child within earshot, and the booths, where the skillful - and the hopeful - sought to win dolls, stuffed animals or plaster knickknacks, lined the central mall, complete with barkers urging the passing throngs to test their mettle.

Riders of the Merry-Go-Round had the opportunity, once each revolution of the big circular platform, to try snatching a brass ring suspended almost beyond reach from the gaily-colored overhanging roof. Successful brass ring-snatchers got a free ride.

The prancing wooden horses, their carved wooden manes and tails aloft as though lifted by a gale of wind, rose and fell upon their stanchions like the ocean waves rolling into shore. As horse and rider approached the coveted brass ring, only perfect synchronization of a horse on the peak of its rise and the nimbleness of a rider's outstretched fingers permitted a youngster the thrill of success.

How I yearned to get that brass ring! The sturdy parental arm encircling my waist and holding me safely and firmly to the wooden saddle was all that prevented me from leaping into thin air and probable injury.

Contagious excitement charged the atmosphere of the Fair Grounds. Knots of men and boys gathered at the horse stalls and around the race track. Groups of women clustered about the displays of needlework, preserves, quilts, bread-stuffs, handiwork and crafts of all kinds.

Boys and girls scampered from pen to pen, ran from tent to tent, dodged among the guy-wires, ropes and pegs that anchored the tents. In and out of the big old Exhibition Hall went the people, the old, the young and the middle-aged. Crackerjacks, popcorn, and tonic were consumed by all.

It was Fair Day, and as more and more people converged on the site, the murmur of laughter and greetings swelled and rose as the crowd grew larger.

The Merry-Go-Round turned and spun, the horses galloped, and the calliope tooted and whistled its reedy tunes. The day wore into afternoon.

Too soon it was time to gather the family, herd the children back to the parking lot, locate the car, and start across the Cape for home.

Dusty and tired, still stimulated with the myriad of unaccustomed sights, sounds and smells, the crowds, the rides, the grand awareness we'd attended the Event of the summer season, we chugged homeward along narrow tree-shaded Phinney's Lane, through Centerville's elm-lined Main Street, across Bumps River Bridge to Osterville.

How quiet our tiny village seemed as we camp up Crocker's Hill. Here there was no bustle, no rush of people, no traffic - nothing but the usual loafers hanging about the post office.

There wasn't even someone to tell about the day's adventure. All that remained were the memories of the great Barnstable Fair.

Is it the same today? In many ways, it is. The old Fair Grounds are no longer home to the fair. Now we travel to Falmouth and find the new Fair Grounds on the north side of Route 151. The parking lots stretch over a large acreage cut from the wooded moraine.

The horse pulls draw fine crowds, prizes go to best specimens of farm animals, the Merry-Go-Round is augmented by the Ferris Wheel and other rides, the games of chance at the booths are hawked by barkers with new faces, old come-ons.

As in the older days, Prohibition days they were, no alcoholic beverages are sold, but plenty of thirst-quenchers, as well as hot dog, hamburger, sandwich and snack counters abound. The Barnstable Fair still attracts people from far and near. They all come by car; horse-drawn carts no longer vie for space or wait in parking areas.

The Midway resounds with laughter and greetings as friends meet friends. Fun and pleasure, tents and flags, bright lights and gaiety are magnets for thousands.

You, too, can attend the Barnstable Fair and provide children with memories to be recalled when another half-century of summers has passed into oblivion.