

## FLASHBACK



One hundred and twenty-seven years after the first New York State Fair in Syracuse, a crowd walks this week toward the modern-day Midway at the fairgrounds. Michael Greenlar/mgreenlar@syracuse.com

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# The first fair in Syracuse: Rain and pickpockets, but no whale

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Between 1842 and 1889, the New York state fair was held in several different cities, including Albany, Auburn, Buffalo, Elmira, Saratoga Springs, Syracuse and Watertown.

In 1890, a group of influential Syracuse residents, led by James Geddes, convinced the New York Society of Agriculture that the fair should make a permanent home in Syracuse. They purchased 100 acres of land for \$30,000 and donated it.

The state fair has been a Syracuse tradition ever since.

The first state fair in Syracuse at its current location saw bad weather, prohibition politics, pickpockets, and a very large, smelly and unwelcome visitor.

Heavy rain for three straight days turned the fairgrounds into a muddy mess and kept attendance low.

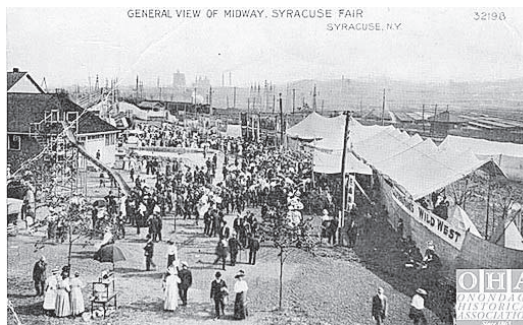
"It was no uncommon sight during the afternoon to see a well-dressed man standing on one foot in a mud hole, while with his umbrella he tried to fish out of the sticky soil the overshoe which had sucked from his other foot," The Daily Standard observed.

The weather broke on Sept. 15 and "attendance was large and everyone could go about where he or she pleased without the aid of a boat or rubber boots."

Standing water remained in puddles and ditches, but "the most timid young lady could cross with the aid of her escort's arm."

Vendors tried to make up for lost time and reported a big jump in refreshment and cigar sales.

The temperance movement had its own tent and signs to lure people inside: "Home, religion, virtue and patriotism demand your vote for lemonade." Everyone left with pockets "loaded with prohibition propaganda."



An early view of the New York State Fairgrounds in an undated postcard from the Onondaga Historical Association.

Pickpockets, many from out of town, were very common, and the police created special patrols to catch them.

John Williams, of Utica, was caught trying to steal the gold watch from former Sherriff Samuel Ferguson.

Animals were, like today, a big attraction.

The horse judging drew "many hundred pairs of eyes ... focused on the magnificent Percherons, Clydesdales and Cleveland Bays as they were led prancing around the enclosure before the judges."

Mud and water had kept most people away from the pigs during the first few days, but with the sun out the Standard reported nothing could stop "cane and umbrella carrying public in getting within joking distance of the prized porkers."

The paper said, "the pig is a lazy beast and when not eating he passes his time in sleeping."

Fairgoers, in a practice that would not be tolerated today, prodded the sleeping pigs in the back until "they stood up and showed themselves."

One "beast" was denied entry into the 1890 State Fair.

Early in the year a fisherman came

upon a 65-foot, 75-ton whale that had become stranded on a beach along the Atlantic Ocean.

A 1990 Post-Standard article said the fisherman sensed he could make money on this opportunity: "He bought 60 barrels of embalming fluid, cleaned up the carcass, and loaded it up onto a barge for a tour of the Northeast."

He arrived in Syracuse on the Erie Canal in September, just in time for the State Fair.

But the summer tour had taken its toll, and the whale began to stink. The fisherman was denied entry into the fairgrounds.

Undeterred, the fisherman floated his barge into the city and docked on North Salina Street.

"Nothing of the kind has ever been on exhibition before," gushed the Standard, who reported that 23 people could sit in the whale's mouth.

The Evening Herald on Sept. 19, 1890, declared the fair a success: "The first Fair of the New York State Agricultural society upon the new and permanent grounds near this city demonstrated the assertions that Syracuse is the best place in the State for these great expositions."