

S. J. McKee Archives



RG2SF1 Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba

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Part Of: RG 2 Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba Association fonds

Description Level: Sous-fonds

Fonds Number: RG2SF1

GMD: multiple media

Date Range: 1903-1991

Physical Description: 3.47 m textual records; 793 graphics

History /

Biographical:

The Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba has been an institution almost as long as Brandon has been a city, although under the guise of several different names. The idea of an exhibition came from Charles Whitehead, who was the founder and first president of the fair. Whitehead was one of the earliest and most prominent businessmen in Brandon. The first Brandon fair was organized in October of 1882, by the Brandon Agricultural Society (BAS). The Board of Directors of the BAS offered up two hundred dollars in prize money, but poor weather and a subsequently small turnout of people and exhibits to the downtown location caused the fair to do poorly. Undeterred, the Board of Directors began to make plans for the second fair, in what was to become an annual event. This time, due to generous grants from the city, district, and province, the Board of Directors was able to purchase land just south of the city to hold the fair on and built a Crystal Palace to hold exhibits in. In October 1883, there were seven hundred and thirty entries, and the fair, the first to be held on the new fair grounds, was considered successful.

The Brandon Exhibition was not financially sound however, and by 1888, the Directors knew that major changes had to be made if they wanted to continue the fair. It was decided that October was not the best time to hold an agricultural exhibition because most farmers were in the middle of harvesting and did not have time to leave their farms for an exhibition. A decision was made to move the exhibition to the summer, when most farmers could get away for a few days. In July 1889, the first Brandon summer fair was held. The Directors had managed to revamp the fair in order to appeal to the wider public. The fair was a huge success, with both city and rural people attending.

The Board of Directors formally established the Western Agricultural and Arts Association (WAAA) in 1892 to take over management duties of the fair from the BAS. However, the first meeting of the WAAA was not until 1897. There is no explanation for the five year delay. The WAAA received generous donations from the various governments, and the citizens of Brandon. In 1897, the Board of Directors purchased another 42 acres of land from the city that was located beside the fair grounds. They erected a grandstand and new stables. Prize money was increased, there were special prizes offered for the first time, and special exhibition trains were available to transport fair goers at a reduced rate.

The 1897 fair was the major turning point for the Brandon exhibition. The fair appealed to both urban and rural dwellers. The Board wanted to put Brandon on the map, and accordingly, they brought forward events and entertainment that would do so. The first Traveller's Day, still running strong today, was put on in 1912. The parade associated with it was unlike any

Brandon had seen before. Despite the attractions, carnivals and midways that were beginning to dominate the fair, organizers insisted that it was still primarily an agricultural event. The promotion of agriculture was still prominent at the exhibition. As local historians have written, "the exhibition symbolized the accomplishments and potential of the region, and encouraged all agriculturists to strive towards higher standards."

By 1912, all outstanding loans had been paid off, and the Board of Directors could boast an eleven thousand dollar surplus in funds. As well, the physical assets available to the summer fair were expanded dramatically in 1913. In 1913, Brandon was granted the honour of hosting the Dominion Exhibition. From the funding that came in for this prestigious event the Board of Directors was able to build a new grandstand, erect new display buildings, replace the racetrack, and generally expand and improve the fair grounds. Another 80 acres of land was bought from the city for the summer fair. The Brandon Dominion Exhibition was declared open on 15 July 1913 by Manitoba Premier Rodmond Roblin. Although it was a resounding success, the Directors ended up having to pay for parts of it out of their own pockets.

Canada entered World War One in the late summer of 1914. The WAAA reached an agreement with the military that the army could use the fairgrounds during the year if they allowed the WAAA use of the grounds for the fair week. Because of limitations put on the fair because of the war, the Brandon exhibition became more involved with the Western Canada Fair Circuit. This organization enabled the summer fair to join in the exhibitions that worked together to bring events like the midway to their exhibitions.

It was also during this time that moral reform became more prevalent in Canadian society. Due to this growing concern with moral purity and the desire for social reform, the Directors had to find ways to ensure that the summer exhibition did not cross the boundaries of good taste. There was a short-lived protest in 1913 against horseracing, but by 1916, then-president of the fair, R.M. Matheson, cast the tie breaking vote in favour of letting both the horseracing and the betting continue. By 1917, the Board had decided against allowing betting, but the horseracing was allowed to continue.

After the war ended, financial stress on the part of the winter fair brought forward a proposal to amalgamate the summer and winter fairs. The provincial government stated that they were interested in supporting an amalgamation, and the two fair boards resolved to consider the option. In spring of 1920, the winter fair backed out the deal because they felt they would lose out to the WAAA in the deal. Not to be deterred, the WAAA applied for incorporation with the provincial government. On 3 April 1920, the WAAA was incorporated as the Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba (PEM). In 1920, the official title of the summer fair was changed from the Inter-Provincial Exhibition to the Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba.

After incorporation the Board of Directors was increased to a membership of twenty. The provincial exhibition continued to increase and change with the times. The directors tried to make each fair interesting and stimulating for the people of Brandon and the surrounding areas. A Manitoba Government Building was opened in 1927, by Premier John Bracken, and an Automobile Building opened in 1927. By 1929, the Provincial Exhibition was one of the leading summer exhibitions in Western Canada. Unfortunately, 1929 was also the beginning of a decade-long Depression throughout Canada and the United States. The exhibition continued though, although at a less grandiose level. The exhibition was the site of some work relief programs throughout the thirties, but the grants were generally small.

It was also during the 1930s that people began wanting a change in the management of the Board. For many years, almost since the inception of the fair, the Board had been run by the same group of men who took turns in the various positions. In 1933, there were several men brought forward to run against the Directors at the annual general meeting. A total of forty four nominations went up for the twenty positions. After the dust had settled, seven new faces took seats around the Directors table.

During World War Two, the Provincial Exhibition managed to continue. The Board made an agreement with the military that while their buildings could be used by the military during the war, the fair would be able to take control of the buildings for fair week. While the fair remained open, its exhibits were hampered by the war. In 1942, for example, the Wartime Prices and Trades Board declared that farm machinery could not be exhibited for the duration. This was one of the fair's bigger draws, and its absence was felt greatly. As another concession to the war, the livestock show had to be reduced from five days to three, although this decision was met by protest from many of the directors. Despite these impediments, the entries into the agricultural exhibits continued to increase. Horse racing, long a bone of contention among members of the Board was almost eliminated in 1942, but a compromise was made and the Directors allowed one day of racing at the 1943 fair.

After the war, the prize money increased by up to twenty-five percent in an effort to increase the number of exhibitors. Many new events were added to the fair roster, including an annual 4-H show and farm camps for children. A Trade Show was added in 1952 and became a large success. The fair always enjoyed support from the City of Brandon, although there were the occasional tensions between the two. In 1955 the Board approved a proposal by R.A. Hodges to sponsor a Dream Home contest. While the attraction was a big success, the Directors evidently did not receive the cut of the proceeds that Hodges had promised them. The fair Board ended up fifty-five hundred dollars in debt.

In 1958 an attempt was made to break the all male hold on the directorate. While no women were elected to the Board itself, a Women's Advisory Committee was created to provide input into fair activities. The original committee was made up of Mrs. D. Elviss, Mrs. D. Graham, Mrs. G. McRae, and Mrs. F. Heeney.

It was also during this time that the Board began to face more direct competition from Winnipeg. The Red River Exhibition had been operating for several years, and its Board of Directors wanted their exhibition to be admitted into the Western Canadian Association of Exhibition. This would not have been particularly good for the Brandon Provincial Exhibition. Partly due to the Brandon Board's vigorous protests, Winnipeg was only granted an associate membership.

By the end of 1958, the Brandon fair was once again facing financial difficulties. The Provincial Exhibition was at its peak at the end of the 1950s. By 1961 the fair recorded a net loss of sixty-five hundred dollars. Because of financial problems, the fair Board had to mortgage its property for \$50 000. As well, the Royal American Shows left Brandon for Winnipeg in 1966, leaving the Directors scrambling to find another midway. It took several years and several different companies before the Directors settled on the Conklin Brothers Shows. To make matters worse, the grandstand was condemned in 1974, leaving the fair without a place to hold its grandstand show. This show was replaced by the Western Canada Rodeo Circuit, in an attempt to regain patrons.

By 1966 both the summer and winter fair Boards had decided that one facility could be used to house both the summer and winter fairs. Both financially and practically, it became an increasingly good idea to merge the two fairs together. In 1969, the Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba and the Manitoba Winter Fair were amalgamated to become the Manitoba Exhibition Association. Ground was broken a few years later on the summer fair grounds, and by 1972, the Keystone Centre was open for business. The official opening was at the 1973 Winter Fair. From then on, the Provincial Exhibition, Royal Manitoba Winter Fair and, later, AgEx, were housed in the same building, and run by the same board of directors.

Custodial History:

These files were housed with the WAAA, the PEM, and the MEA until c1986 when they were transferred to the S.J. McKee Archives at Brandon University.

Scope and Content:

The sous-fonds consists of textual records and photographs from the Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba. The textual records include prize lists, programs, minutes, financial, contracts, by laws, administrative files, original results, news releases, scrapbooks and tickets. The photographs include animal shows and events, dignitaries, entertainment, attractions, ceremonies, buildings and other events.

It has been divided into eleven series, including: (1) Documents; (2) Minutes; (3) Financial records; (4) Administrative files; (5) Prize lists and programs; (6) News releases; (7) Original results; (8) Tickets; (9) Photographs; (10) Scrapbooks; and (11) Miscellaneous.

Storage Location: RG 2 Provincial Exhibition of Manitoba Association fonds
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