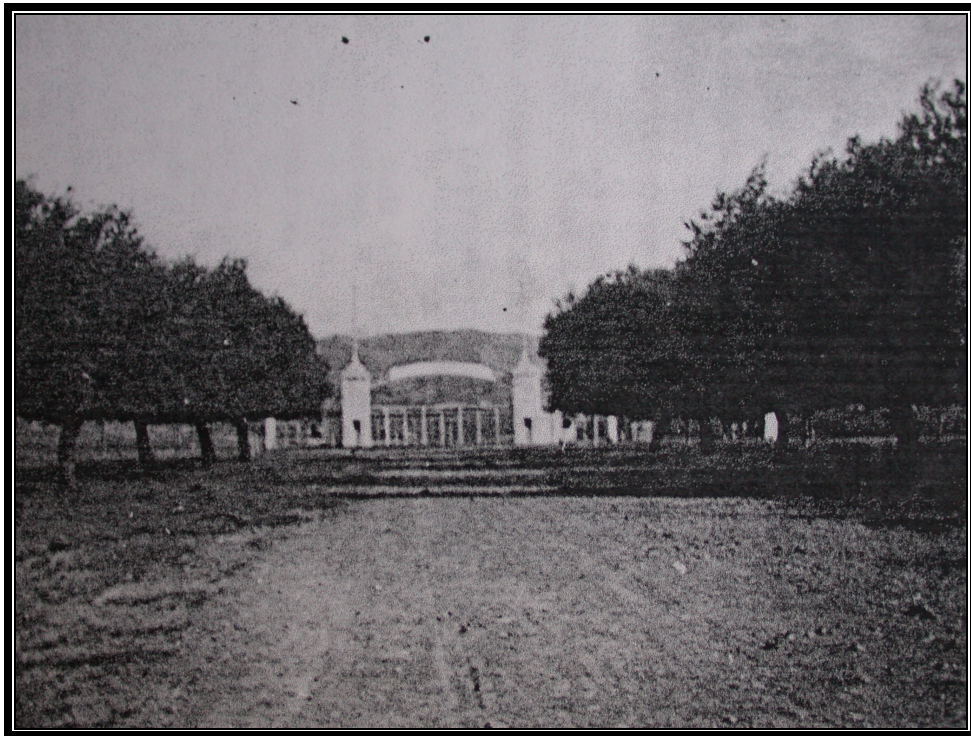


Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds

Historic Sites Review



Helena/Lewis and Clark County Historic Preservation Commission

December, 2003

Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds Historic Sites Review



Project Background

In the fall of 2003, an historic sites review was conducted at the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds to determine whether there existed sites or structures worthy of attention for historic preservation purposes. Specifically, information was sought on structures dating from the years 1870 to 1953 with an emphasis on those buildings and sites still standing from that time. An assessment of those buildings was then made to determine whether any met the criteria for status as “Heritage Properties” as defined in the Montana Antiquities Act. The review was conducted and this report was prepared by Paul Putz, Helena / Lewis and Clark County Historic Preservation Officer.

Summary of Findings

Three historic buildings and one historic feature are herein determined to meet the criteria for “Heritage Properties”. Those are the West Barns, being two structures standing south of the racetrack and west of the main entry; a structure identified as the “Paddock” which stands on the southeast corner of the racetrack, and the one mile long racetrack that occupies the center of the subject property. These buildings and feature do not constitute a historic district whether contiguous or non-contiguous. Nor are they a collection of buildings. Each property, with the

exception of the West Barns is separate from the others. The West Barns are two separate structures, each of which is capable of making its own contribution, however, in tandem their historic presence is more meaningful.

Other fairgrounds structures date from the historic period (1870 – 1953) but because of later alterations their contribution (historical integrity) is compromised. Most noted of these is Mechanical Hall, Mineral Hall, the Woolston Well and the Boys and Girls Building.

Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds (Formerly the Montana State Fairgrounds)

Site Description

The subject property consists of 160 acres located just north of the city of Helena, Montana. It is bordered on the south and west by Custer Avenue and roughly on northwest and north by Horseshoe Bend Drive. To the northeast, separated from the fairgrounds by private property, is Green Meadow Drive and to the southeast, Mitchell Avenue.

The land occupied by the fairgrounds is low-lying and flat, consisting of gravels deposited from the erosion of surrounding mountains and ancient lake deposits. These tend to slope gently to the north along a shallow, warm water drainage called Silver Creek fed by Silver Springs located a short distance southwest of the property¹. Water table levels on the property are near the surface and are exposed in a recreational pond in the southeast corner.

Trees such as willow and ash along with brush and grasses naturally occur in undeveloped and undisturbed areas of the fairgrounds, largely on the south and west edges. On the southern section and along the northern edge of a large race track in the center of the property are the remnants of planted boulevards and landscaping consisting of willow trees planted around a century ago.

Generally divided into developed and partially developed areas, the fairground is roughly sectioned into quarters. On the southeast is the public entrance, parking lots and the majority of structures devoted to public use. These are of mixed vintage, scale and design. A rodeo grounds, picnic area and playground also are centered here as well as the aforementioned recreational pond. Farther west the grounds break into scattered picnic areas and rough land, extending northward around the racetrack where a camping facility for recreational vehicles was constructed several years ago on the north west corner of the property. East of this area, centered in the properties northern border, stand several horse barns beyond which the land opens up to an unused northeast quadrant. The center of the property contains a flat oval track build for horse racing and extending for nearly half a mile east to west, its dimensions nearly cutting the property in half. The center of the racetrack is largely unoccupied.

The fairgrounds are fenced with a variety of metal wire materials. Some sections of these date from an early period.

Maps of the property are found in the second section of this report.

Historical Summation

Fairs began early in the history of Lewis and Clark County. Soon after gold was discovered in the early 1860s, several communities sprang up in the hills around the Helena valley. Ambitions for the future of those communities and for the territory in general led organizers to promote expositions of regional goods and services. In 1868, such an exposition was held, being primarily sponsored by businessmen in Helena². No doubt limited in choices for a site and facing a deadline, the group rented land owned by Madam Coady (also spelled Cody), proprietress of the Tenmile House on the road between Silver City and Helena³. There the corporation feverishly erected buildings and other facilities in time to hold the first declared Territorial Fair in September of 1868⁴. The following year, a corporate entity called the Territorial Fair Association held a similar event⁵ at the same site. This property was not the current Fairgrounds but there is no doubt that the 1870 Territorial Fair took place on what would be the State Fairgrounds and then the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds, the buildings on which are subject of this report⁶.

The early fairs, though haphazard events⁷, were sufficiently successful to encourage the establishment of a permanent fairgrounds. In the summer of 1870, an organization called the Montana Agricultural Association reorganized to form the Montana Agricultural Mineral and Mechanical Association and solicited \$10,000 from those interested in buying stock at \$25.00 a share to support a regional fair⁸. By early August of that year they had \$7,350 and were eagerly seeking property on which to conduct their celebration⁹. Later that month, they purchased about 83 acres in Section 13, township 10N, Range 4W, being north and west of Last Chance Gulch between Tenmile Creek and Crystal Springs¹⁰.

Considerable hope was placed in the success of the fairs of 1868-9 which were pointedly called the "First Annual Territorial" and "Second Annual Territorial" fair. It is clear that organizers wanted to establish a true regional exhibition representing as many of the established counties as possible. In fact, the fair of 1868 was seen as a pump primer, one demonstrating the feasibility of a comprehensive celebration. Although Helena people comprised the bulk of fair promoters, they encouraged representatives from outlying counties in an effort to spread enthusiasm for the event. That first year, residents in the Helena vicinity were urged to bring anything they could to the fair as exhibits to swell the crowd and the list of goods presented¹¹. Special notice was made the following year to encourage Deer Lodge and Missoula counties to participate¹². To the credit of the organizers, the 1869 fair seized the imagination of many people in the Territory and set the stage for the broad-based trade event promoters envisioned, though Helena contributions were required to balance the books. The following year's Territorial Fair was "the real thing"¹³.

The flourish with which this initial effort took root garnered publicity documenting the creation of the first three buildings on the site: Floral Hall, Mechanical Hall and Agricultural Hall, built in 1870. Only a month was taken to erect these structures¹⁴. The following year, lumber was purchased for double stock sheds and a two story house “as large as Floral Hall” to be constructed at the fairgrounds¹⁵. These buildings were repeats of previous years and it must be assumed the earlier structures were dismantled after the fairs. The 1870 buildings were more permanent, lasting at least several years. Floral Hall may have survived into the twentieth century as an original piece built into a larger structure called Exhibit Hall.

Horseracing was a primary fairground activity from the beginning. Indeed, the newspaper pointed out that the 1868 site had a “splendid” racetrack called the *Fashion Course*¹⁶. This facility was used seasonally and newspaper accounts gleefully predict exciting races and then report on the outcomes throughout the summer months. The same became true of the fairgrounds track. The fairgrounds property was selected late in August of 1870, barely allowing for the construction of a decent racecourse before fair time¹⁷ a month later. Nonetheless, there were races at the fair of 1870. A spectacular track, fully one mile in length, was constructed in that brief interval¹⁸. The only one of its kind in the region, this mile-long track became the fairgrounds centerpiece. It is shown clearly on a map of the Helena Valley in 1887¹⁹. Other information indicates the track was paved around 1890 with a few carloads of genuine Kentucky earth shipped to Helena specifically for that purpose²⁰. Such extravagance indicated both the ambitions of race organizers, symbolically joining the track to Kentucky’s excellent racing traditions, and the monetary success of local racing. Races were held not just during the fair but were announced throughout the summer, probably garnering for the facility a consistent source of revenue²¹. Races were not popular with everyone. General anti-gambling sentiment later hampered the development of racing facilities and even the Fair itself²².

Every year between 1868 and 1895, Helena hosted a fair. Area promoters filled an official vacuum by blatantly declaring their fair to have first Territorial and then State status without legislative or executive recognition. Present sensibilities may view this askance, but at the time, the term “state” had stronger other-than-government connotations. Many counties freely participated in the fair as a commercial promotion of state-wide proportions. In 1891 the Lewis and Clark County property was sold to an organization named the Montana State Fair Association as the original charter had expired. Throughout the early 1890s, enthusiasm and commitment to the event continued to be strong and the fair continued to highlight Montana goods. The economic foundation of the fair, however, dictated its fate. The panic of 1893 and plummeting silver prices exhausted regional resources. There was no fair in 1896 or for six years afterward. Ownership of the fairground property was lost.²³, the grounds were abandoned and the buildings began to deteriorate²⁴.

In the late 1890s, the legislature sanctified Butte as the location of the real state fair but it did not seem to take. Butte lost interest as the Columbia Gardens were being developed. Political jostling among Montana communities to secure a state fair ensued, most heatedly contested by Great Falls and Helena, when financial recovery took hold. As they had before and as they would again, Helena citizens subsidized the fairgrounds. To secure state support, they agreed to buy the old fairgrounds property for about \$10,00 and turn them over to the legislature²⁵. Finally, on October 5th, 1903 a legislatively recognized Montana State Fair, at the Helena location, opened its gates to 20,000 enthusiastic visitors and the State Fairgrounds took on a new life²⁶.

In regional terms, the Montana State Fair was a highly successful, popular event. Large crowds and many exhibitors crammed the stands and barns that lined the central racetrack. In the flush years prior to and during WWI, special trains brought fairgoers to Helena from throughout Montana. Local streetcar lines connected the fairgrounds to the immediate area. An array of production greeted attendees, ranging from home baking and sewing to beef production and manufacturing. When Minnesota railroad tycoon J. J. Hill guided President Taft around the fair in 1909, Hill bragged that the agricultural exhibition was best he had ever seen²⁷.

Taft's visit was well publicized and many excellent photographs of the fair survive from that day. They show throngs of people amid wooden exhibition halls whose long monitor roofs soar overhead. The racetrack is obviously a centerpiece, circled by barns, halls and stands all ready to supply it with spectators and horseflesh. Pennants and flags fly from every peak and the crowds appear electrified with expectation. This was the fair envisioned by area boosters four decades before - a festival of their society at its apex, acclaimed by the age's chief envoys of money and power.

By the century's second decade, agriculture in Montana boomed. In 1910, small-grain farming overtook Montana mining and even ranching as a leading industry²⁸. Homesteads flourished on a grand scale as they were swiftly populated by governmental policy, the exuberance of promoters like Hill and blessed with favorable weather. Unprecedented agricultural production created a dominant economic wave, the frothy, iridescent crest of which was the State Fair. Hundreds, then thousands, of participants flocked to the event, bringing to it what they hoped to be "The Best". People statewide competed to prove they produced the best fruit jellies, the best winter wheat, the best ewes, the best oats, the best rutabagas, the best apple pies, the best bulls, the best quilts, the best barley – seemingly the Fair judged best of everything and afterward published in extensive detail names of winners and runners up in every category. In 1903 the fair attracted 248 entries and 20,000 visitors. At its zenith in 1915, when the number of exhibits swelled to nearly 15,000 entries viewed by 50,000 people, the Montana State Fair truly became an agricultural extravaganza²⁹.

A structural as well as celebratory blossoming took hold. In 1903, 1904 and again in 1914-15, major improvements were made at the fairgrounds. No less than a dozen large structures went up during this period and many smaller buildings and installations were included. These included three large livestock barns; poultry, dairy, automobile and mining exhibit spaces; animal pens, booths, public facilities and grandstands. On the cusp of the fair's decline, a masonry Horticultural Hall and large entry gateway were constructed, both designed in the classical tradition of Chicago's fantastically indulgent Columbia Exposition of 1893.

Such complex and intense activity required preparations of a similar nature. Logistically, the State Fair must have presented nightmarish challenges, apparently all tamed through the efficiency and experience of its managers. Fair boards, whether in the early years or during the time of the State Fair, listed important and involved people as members. Long tallies of supporters accompany this leadership in the records of fair operations. The State Fair hierarchy included a representative from each of Montana's many counties and most counties organized large booths festooned with their summer's bounty. When the fair moved under the legislator's wing in 1903 a county alliance was sought, paralleling the organizational efforts of 1868. The legislature reached out to counties both to encourage and to facilitate union. County governments were allowed to allocate up to \$1,000 to subsidize fair exhibits and later could spend \$800 to promote the same³⁰. No doubt, such inspired networking on the part of fair organizers played a major role in the phenomenally successful fairs of the early twentieth century.

Sadly, the Boom years were not to last. The grim decline of American agriculture in the Midwest and West began early in Montana. Homestead policy collapsed under the combined pressures of falling prices, depression, grasshoppers and drought. The 1917 *Premium List and Program* for the fair stopped listing exhibit numbers for lack of a favorable comparison and the 1920 issue included a desperate plea from Montana's governor who called upon the citizenry to show their loyalty and attend the State Fair³¹. Troubles were far too monumental, even by then, for mere *esprit de corps* to prevail and the fair sank with the staggering economy. Agriculture, a robust influence a mere decade before, was so weakened that in 1926 there was no State Fair and only the intervention of donors, mostly from Helena, encouraged the subsequent meager appropriations that allowed exhibitions between 1927 and 1932³².

Losses mounted during this time and documents dating from it exude a despairing gloom. The expansive Exhibit Hall and its smaller partner disappeared from the record and were not rebuilt. Meanwhile, State Fair Board reports refer to "replacing buildings lost by fire" and show large fire insurance revenues. These reports, ebullient and detailed during the good years, now degenerate into dry accounting-speak. As bad times corroded confidence, rumors of dishonesty in fair board business circulated³³. Legislative support waned, the last special appropriations built a Sheep Barn in 1929 at the urging of the Wool Growers and a long-sought Boys and Girls Building in 1931³⁴. Finally, in 1933, the Helena grounds stood empty while the state

piggybacked its exhibitions on the local fair in Great Falls. The Montana State Fair was never to return to the capitol city.

Gradually, time and calamity removed the buildings that had hosted affable President Taft and his ambitious guide, Mr. Hill. Decay crept slowly along the wooden roofs and foundations, erasing them by mid-century. Earthquake, which took its toll quickly, struck the fairgrounds hard in the fall of 1935. The deep gravels of the location were greatly susceptible to tremors and, ironically, the most substantial buildings were the most affected. This is implicit in the newspaper report on earthquake victims, one of whom was caught in the large brick and tile Horticultural Building:

The second man killed was Charles Siggelink, a transient, at the fairgrounds camp. He was sleeping with several others in one of the buildings given over to that purpose when the temblor came. During the quake, he dashed through the entrance of the building, and was caught by the falling brick and timber. Siggelink was transported to St. Peter's hospital for treatment. He died at 7:00 a.m. the next morning³⁵.

There was more bad news for people and places on the property:

With one crash the Woolston well pump shack at the fairgrounds was leveled, catching six city employees beneath it. Through the efforts of Dan Cloninger, one of the six and others, the men were dragged from the fallen shack and taken to safety. While the pumps and shack were said to be completely destroyed, no one was injured. The front gate at the fairgrounds, where the pumps are located, was cut from the ground almost as cleanly as if by a gigantic scythe.³⁶

The “shack”, a handsome brick building, dating from around 1887, hit twice by the ’35 quakes, lost its smokestack on October 18, and was apparently flattened later in the month. The 1938 aerial photograph shows the Woolston Well pump house briefly replaced by a smaller structure and interest remained the well as a water source as city plans progressed³⁷.

Other earthquake damage at the fairgrounds no doubt occurred. Insurance maps from the 1930’s to the early 1950’s note the presence of broken water mains at the fairgrounds and the maps are pasted over with revisions and marked “x” in ink where structures were removed from service and possibly taken down. The most resplendent additions to the property, the masonry Horticultural Building and impressive entry gates, were completely destroyed, thus what was built for a century of service lasted merely a decade. For a few decades more the Horticultural Building’s sprawling concrete floor lay in place like a grave marker.

Although there followed a long period of decline and deterioration of facilities at the old State Fairgrounds the property was not entirely abandoned. A caretaker continued to be housed on the grounds, installed in a house erected near the old entry in the late '30s. From the period 1932 to 1959 buildings at the fairgrounds served various purposes. Probably frustrated by the potential of large but empty fairgrounds buildings offering flexible, if not up-to-date space, the community kept these structures in mind and was creative in using them. The news of November 2, 1935 was one indication of that:

“most of the patients at the wrecked county hospital are at the federal transient camp at the state fair grounds and the Odd Fellows' home.”³⁸

During the 1930s the Works Progress Administration (WPA) used the fairgrounds as their headquarters, sharing responsibility for them with the still extant Montana State Fair Association³⁹. During these Depression years, several of the structures housed transients, a volume business along the nation's rail lines. Another consistent occupant was the Montana State Fish and Game Department who probably appeared on the scene in 1903 and embellished the grounds with an aquarium in 1915⁴⁰. For many years after the fair closed, the exhibit halls constructed behind the grandstands were used as workshops by this agency⁴¹. In 1937 the state leased the fairgrounds to be used as an “auto trailer camp” for \$700 as those responsible for the property continued to derive benefit from it and its facilities⁴².

Lewis and Clark County, through its Extension Program, adopted one and possibly more of its structures for 4-H activities. The large barns that are still standing west of the modern multi-purpose building were dedicated to their use. At least by 1949 and on occasion in the 1950s, 4-H shows and judging took place on the grounds in front of and probably utilizing these barns⁴³.

Between 1932 and 1966 many of the historic fairground structures were removed. A caretaker's house and a stable were lost in a fire in the fall of 1937⁴⁴. The grandstands, west barns and smaller buildings remained. So did the mile long race track which was abandoned but for a small section in front of the stands where a second automobile (stock car) race course was in place around 1955. In 1959, the Lewis and Clark Fairgrounds Association, considerably assisted by Bill Carson from Helena, formed to reinvigorate the fairgrounds and celebrations taking place there. It arranged with the State of Montana to manage activities on the property. By that time, fairgrounds buildings were largely in ruin.

In 1961, after much work and preparation, the first annual “Last Chance Stampede” took place followed in 1969 by the first Lewis and Clark County Fair⁴⁵. This latter event crowned several years of intense planning and development at the fairgrounds. Major changes and improvements took place funded in part by the Johnson Administration's “War on Poverty” program and other resources brought to bear on the long neglected and underutilized property. Working from a

comprehensive plan prepared around 1960, large areas of the southern and western fairgrounds area were reconfigured into a children's park, picnic areas, parking lots and recreational vehicle campground⁴⁶. New buildings were inserted as picnic shelters, administrative offices and service structures. Some existing buildings were relocated and at least one, a horse barn, was moved to an adjacent ranch but other reports that large barns were relocated on the property do not corroborate with insurance map information⁴⁷.

A master fairgrounds development plan targeted at the year 1980 was begun in 1959. The plan envisioned a fairgrounds and park complete with wildlife refuge, historical displays (it went to some length to point out that there was no room in town for large historical equipment, vehicles and structures) and exhibit buildings. The recreational vehicle campground was to expand into most of the western and northern edges of the property and supply income to supplement fairgrounds support. If pursued, which it was not, the 1980 plan would have further built on the accomplishments of the 1960⁴⁸s.

The period between the late 1950s and 1990s witnessed growing confidence in local assumption of first operations and then ownership of the old State Fairgrounds. Building on the experience of consistent usage by local groups, organizations and economic interests, fairground managers, whether private or public, remained reasonably optimistic regarding future possibilities for fairgrounds use. While in partnership with the state, the Lewis and Clark Fairgrounds Association reported its profits to the Montana Attorney General. In 1963, over \$7,000 was so reported⁴⁹. In 1981 Lewis and Clark County contracted temporary management of the fairground property and followed up in 1997 with conditional ownership of the land⁵⁰. New structures appeared, including a large multi-purpose building whose flexible interior replaced the strict assignments given its historic fairgrounds predecessors and opened opportunities for many different commercial and other users at the site.

Setbacks were always present. For example, in 1992 a Lewis and Clark County emergency mill levy proposal failed, compelling the County and a non-profit Fairgrounds Users Group to enter into partnership with the latter taking over operations. Another round of planning took place afterward and an updated master plan was produced in 2000. Throughout this time operations struggled with narrow income margins and rising costs. In 2003, the County reassumed direct operation of the fairgrounds.

Today, 100 years after the State Fair began on the property, much has changed. The most spectacular structures dating back eighty to ninety years have been removed, leaving only the track and the remnants of a few outbuildings as a 19th century survivors. In 2000 the grandstands, built in 1906, were demolished after their preservation options were strongly debated. Gone, too, is the overall semblance of visual unity. Compared to the images captured in 1931 when at their structural apex, today's fairgrounds tend to ramble, although certain building traditions continue.

Several large structures occupy the area of primary usage, still the southeast corner adjacent to the racetrack. In addition, smaller buildings in the same area have popped up to serve as booths, concession stands and related purposes. Overall, the linear coherence of building layout, assumed in 1870 as facilities lined the racetrack, has dissolved in favor of nodal orientations or expedient necessity. The result is mildly confusing as structures of varying age, scale, design and materials commingle without visual focus.

More than just the layout of the fairgrounds has changed. Today the fairgrounds are not reserved for seasonal horseracing and a fall spectacle. Instead, fairground use is practically constant. Both casual and organized activities take place there, from family picnics to the prominent Last Chance Stampede. Exhibitions featuring significant enterprise – home building and recreation for example – regularly book the multi-purpose building. And the fairgrounds offers meeting facilities and space for assemblies of all kinds. It is a new vision of use, based on decades of working with property given over to such things that has come to the fore. The current hope is that constant use and the occasional major event will place the fairgrounds on that long sought even keel.

The Old Montana State Fairgrounds – now the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds – has a history strongly related to major Montana themes, agriculture being primary among them. Early events at this property inspired and underpinned the major Montana fairs of the early twentieth century, rooted as they were in commercial ambitions and organizational experience of the previous century. Inextricably linked to regional economics, the fair, itself an extravagance, expressed the peaks and valleys of that economy in boom and bust - in bursts of midway lights and thunderous crowds followed by dark and abandoned decay. Buildings came and went at the fairgrounds like so many moveable stands. Sprawling horse barns, stalls and halls erupted and evaporated every few decades, like the dynamic yet ephemeral exhibition they served. Rarely profitable, often desperate, occasionally brilliant, the fair was and its successors remain a kind of enigmatic necessity. Fairs are an aspect of commerce and fairgrounds are useful venues for public recognition. Societal needs demand there be a showplace for goods and accomplishments but, as fairground history reveals, the question always was and always will be, how to make the showplace pay its way.

Surviving Historic Structures and Their Significance

Criteria for Heritage Properties under Montana State Law parallels that of the National Register of Historic Places. As a “Rule of Thumb”, the criteria most readily recognizes sites that are 50 years old or older. Assuming no younger place is so distinguished as to warrant attention there, the fairgrounds possess the following structures dating from before 1953:

- The Fairgrounds itself, dating from 1870
- The Mile Long Horseracing Track, built 1870
- The Woolston Wellhouse, built 1887
- The Automobile Racetrack, built 1916
- The Old West Barn, built around 1924 - 27
- The Mining and Minerals Building, built 1910
- The Mechanical Building, built 1904
- The New West Barn, built 1929
- The East Barn or Paddock, built before 1927
- The Helena Trail Riders Headquarters (Boys and Girls building), built 1931
- Tree Lined Avenue, 1903?

The criteria for Heritage Properties also requires a historic place to have “integrity”, that is, a meaningful physical expression of the era in which the place made its historic contribution. Of the above listed properties the following have been altered in a way that has concealed or removed historic appearance:

The Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds is not, in itself, a historic property. The large number of historic structures which stood at the fairgrounds until around 1950 are mostly gone and the sense of place present in historic photographs of the historic fairgrounds is no longer detectable.

The Woolston Wellhouse was altered in the 1950s or 1960s to include a front entry. This was later removed and the original wellhouse was covered in corrugated metal siding.

Automobile racetrack built in 1916. A portion of it was disrupted in the 1950s by the construction of an auto racetrack and later in the 1960s when the new rodeo grounds were built. Very visible in 1938 aerial photographs of the fairgrounds and less so in 1955, the outline of the first automobile racetrack is imperceptible in current overflight images, although some archaeological evidence might exist.

A Tree Lined Avenue of willows greeted visitors to the fairgrounds probably from plantings installed when the state assumed the property in 1903. In 1915-16 the willows

were mature and impressively complemented the elaborate main gate. Today's trees still maintain some of the original configuration but not in sufficient numbers to warrant recognition of the lane as a historic landscape feature.

The Mechanical Building and the Mining and Minerals Building are structurally intact historic survivors. However, recent exterior alterations altered the appearance of these structures and diminished their ability to individually meet National Register criteria. (If these structures were in a historic district, they might contribute.)

Yet another Historic Property Criteria relates to historical significance and the context of that significance. A historic property is valuable if it represents a pattern of historic development or is meaningfully related to a person, events, building styles or construction types of importance to the nation, a state or a locality. The fairground properties potentially relate to several such themes on both the state and local level. The State Fair itself, along with its territorial predecessors is a theme of significance to the history of Montana. The fair was representative of agricultural and commercial ambitions; it was an expression of broad social values, particularly during the homesteading era, and it was a state-wide event of singular proportions which took place, given certain lapses, for six decades on the subject property.

Several sub-themes appear in the history of the fairgrounds, too. Horseracing in Montana is one of them. Barn construction could be another theme associated with the fairgrounds along with the history of institutions like 4-H, the WPA, and the Montana Fish and Game Department, each of which have historical connections to buildings remaining on the grounds.

Structures and features at the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds cover a historical period from 1870 to 1953. Each may relate to the criteria for recognition as historic places for different reasons and present different degrees of historical integrity relating to those criteria. An illustrated summary is provided in this report to demonstrate the findings of this survey.

Prehistoric and Historic Archaeology

No evidence of Heritage Properties of an archaeological nature are known to exist at the fairgrounds. During the 133 years of this property's use as an exhibit area, considerable alteration of ground surfaces took place. Three main periods of ground disturbance are noted: the initial 1870's construction, the State Fair Period from 1903 to 1932 and the 1960's and later period of reconstruction. Prehistoric remains, if any existed, would have been affected by building structures, railroad spurs, racetracks, barns, access roads and underground utilities. At present, only the extreme eastern portion of the property, that being in the area extending east of and then slightly north of the Woolston Well (itself an archaeological feature), remain relatively

undisturbed. At some point an archaeological investigation of this area should be conducted. The presence of nearby Crystal Springs and its stream outlet that once flowed across the grounds offer a favorable environment for past human use of that area.

Historical archaeological deposits have been equally disturbed. New North Barns have been built, the northeast and central track areas have been bulldozed, a modern campground exhumed the northwest corner of the property and major alterations beginning in the 1960's overturned the southern and southeast sections and the surface archaeology with it. Only the area where the westernmost barns stood might survive. While little new historical information could be derived through archaeological investigation in this area, items of curiosity and historical note useful for future display might lie undisturbed there.

Properties determined to meet Antiquates Act criteria recognizing Heritage Properties:

The objective of this study is to determine whether sites, buildings or features on the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds meet the criteria set out in the Montana Antiquities Act for Heritage Properties. The study finds the following sites to meet that criteria:

The West Barns. Two structures standing south of the racetrack and west of the main entry date from the State Fair era (being built in the 1920s) and represent the agricultural theme of that fair period as well as the earlier emphasis on agriculture in the Territory. In addition, the West Barns relate to the sub-themes of Architecture – Barn Building and Social Groups, 4-H. Both these structures possess historical integrity in that they are not altered in major ways from their appearance during the historic period.

The “Paddock” which stands on the southeast corner of the racetrack is another structure relating to the State Fair period of fairgrounds significance. It is the only surviving racetrack building and one that served for many years in that regard. With minor modifications, the Paddock retains its original historical exterior and many elements of its historic interior remain. While additional information on the use of the structure might yet be gleaned, its long-time survival on the grounds, clear relationship to horseracing history and high level of historic integrity allow it to meet historical criteria.

The mile long racetrack that occupies the center of the subject property. As the only major feature remaining from the earliest days of the fairgrounds (built in 1870), the mile long track is the oldest and largest historic feature representing almost all aspects of fairgrounds use over time. While impacted by the construction of the rodeo grounds in its southeast portion, the racetrack is still clearly outlined and has its principal aspects intact. It relates to the statewide theme of horseracing as well as the Territorial and State Fair themes and contributes into the later period of fairgrounds decline as one of the features that still remained active and in which investment was made.

Research Approach

The objective of this report is to quickly review enough County/State Fairgrounds history to determine the relative historical significance of remaining features and buildings on the current fairgrounds property. Historic properties were placed in context by reviewing historical development at the fairgrounds since its beginnings, thus providing information on the significance of surviving features and structures. While determining, where possible, the specific ages and dates of departure of various buildings was considered important some structures appear on the fairgrounds without reference in the newspapers or in the available official reports of the State Fair. At the time of this report, newspaper coverage for the summers preceding the fair (July-August and September) were reviewed because those months have the most fair coverage. Indexes or other leads were used to examine articles printed at other times. Thus, newspaper articles about the fairgrounds printed in winter (a good time for fires) or spring will require exploration when more time or personnel are available.

Considerable survey information came from newspaper accounts, State Fair Board records, brief historical accounts, County deed books, historic photographs and maps, notably Sanborn Insurance maps. The latter provided information beyond original printings through subsequent revisions pasted on and noted on the pages of the 1927 and 1930 volumes. A collection of some newspaper accounts from the 1870's along with published articles and early photographs compiled by local volunteers proved very helpful as did a copy of the fairgrounds research file supplied by the state historic preservation office. The uncataloged photograph collection of the Lewis and Clark County Extension Office proved very helpful. As always, the Photographic Library of the Montana Historical Society yielded many informational images.

A vertical file at the Montana Historical Society Library entitled "Lewis and Clark County, Fairgrounds" provided excellent information on development at the property through organizational documents, newspaper clippings, plans for and some maps of the fairgrounds. Another file set, "Helena Earthquake (1), (2) and (3), yielded up the fate of the Horticultural Building and substantiated the property was much affected by the quakes.

Background information and an analysis of the relative significance of fairs held at the property is presented in an excellent Master's Thesis, "Exhibiting the Possibilities: The Montana State Fair" by Douglas Michael Edwards, also found at the MT Historical Society Library.

Several topics only touched on here merit further study. Horseracing is one of these. Another is the specific organization and operation of the fair. Finally, more can be discovered and presented about the fairground buildings themselves through intensive examination of newspaper accounts during active fairground years. Personal collections of information are said to exist.

Examinations of such collections could be made, however, references to those who have used these papers indicate they may parallel Montana Historical Society holdings. A community solicitation of materials, particularly photographs might be useful in obtaining additional information. Finally, the complexities of the last 50 years are only touched on here and could be expanded.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Map of Lewis and Clarke County, 1887*. Map prepared by Cummings, Cannon and Steele. Lithographed by H. M. Smyth, St. Paul.

² Broad interest in establishing Helena as the location for a Territorial Fair on the part of local businessmen is an index of common ambitions to make Helena a permanent, important community as early as 1868.

³ “Our next Territorial Fair,” *Helena Weekly Herald*, September, 16, 1869. Also, Deed Book G, page 243 describes property on Tenmile Creek Minni Cody purchased on November 15, 1867 from what appears to be a failed irrigation company. This was 160 acres in a narrow section a mile long and ¼ mile deep bordering the creek on the south. The deed gives a meets and bounds description, not helpful in locating the property. Several years later, however, she sells parcels in the northwest ¼ of section 23, placing Tenmile property owned by her south and west of the state fairgrounds. The 1870 purchase by the Montana Agricultural, Mechanical and Mineral Association included nearly 1/4 of west central section 13 to which they added a small south portion (about 22 acres) in 1878. It cost the Association \$1,500 to purchase the fairgrounds and \$100 for a 60 foot stretch southward on which to construct a road. See Deed Books K, P 360-361. In 1888 they deeded a small strip, 50 feet wide, along this southern border to the Montana Central Railroad for a siding. Later, the State of Montana added about 110 more acres to the property, extending it to the south and east. State Fair Board, Abstract, State Board of Examiners., MHS papers.

⁴ Chere Juisto, “It Still Happens at the Lewis and Clark County Fair” in Jon Axline, et. al., *More from the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch, Vol. 1*, Helena Independent Record, Helena, MT, 1995. p. 170. Also, “The Montana Agricultural, Mechanical and Mineral Association,” *Helena Weekly Herald*, July 16, 1868; “The Fair,” *Helena Weekly Herald*, October 1, 1868; “Montana Territorial Agricultural Fair,” *Helena Weekly Herald*, October 15, 1868.

⁵ “Our Territorial Fair,” *Helena Weekly Herald*, July 8 and “The Second Annual Fair of Montana”, September 30, 1869.

⁶ Meloy indicates some early fairs were held at the upper end of Last Chance Gulch. A Sept 16th newspaper account says that the 1869 fair would be held “. . . on the old Fair Grounds near this city..” clearly meaning the Fashion Course often mentioned in 1868. The 1870 site was new ground, as evidenced by the abstract to the property which shows it was held by the government until that year, deeded to a private individual and transferred to the Montana Agricultural, Mineral and Mechanical Association on August 24, 1870.

⁷ Several apologies for unnamed problems with the early fairs appear in newspaper reports and letters printed therein.

⁸ “Our Territorial Fair”, *Helena Weekly Herald* and “Our Next Territorial Fair”, July 8, September 16th, 1870.

⁹ *Helena Weekly Herald*, August 9, 1870 in a reference in Campbell, William, C., *From the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch Vol.1*, Montana Record Publishing Company, Helena, 1951.

¹⁰ See Note 2.

¹¹ “The Fair”, *Helena Weekly Herald*, October 1, 1868.

¹² “The Agricultural Fair”, *Helena Weekly Herald*, September 3, 1869. It is possible these two counties were interested in hosting a Territorial Fair themselves and held back in 1868.

¹³ “The Fair Association – Organized and Completed” *Helena Daily Herald*, August 12, 1870. Luminaries such as Holter, Kohrs, Hedges and Floweree participated in administering and promoting the fair along with men from Gallatin, Jefferson, Maegher, and Madison counties. Kohrs represented Deer Lodge.

¹⁴ Juisto, “It Still Happens. . .”

¹⁵ “Preparations for the Fair”, *Helena Weekly Herald*, July 27, 1871.

¹⁶ “The Montana Agricultural, Mechanical, and Mineral Association”, *Helena Weekly Herald*, July 16th, 1868.

¹⁷ The *Herald* reported in early July of 1870 that the grounds was ready but in mid August the fair board was still looking at land. With a fair scheduled for September 26th, this gave a month to build the facilities, including a track.

¹⁸ “The Fair Grounds”, *Helena Daily Herald*, September 24, 1870. Several articles preceding this report, announce progress on the construction of the racetrack at the fairgrounds. This one confirms the extensive length of the track by stating that its home stretch was “. . . just a quarter of a mile in length. . . .” At 1320 feet, that would necessitate at least a mile’s running. Curiously, the 1887 map shows an oblong course which might either be truly representational

or merely careless drafting. In addition, the 1938 aerial photograph has an unknown diagonal feature lying SW to NE, the same angle as that on the map. If the original track was less than a precise oval the newspaper reporter's qualification that the stretch was "almost perfectly straight" could reflect on the track as a whole and indicate the haste in which the track was constructed. Revisions in the track might have been made when it was "paved" in around 1890. Whatever the possibilities, the 1870 southern (home) stretch of the track remains in position at the fairgrounds today.

¹⁹ *Map of Lewis and Clarke County, 1887.*

²⁰ Jiusto, "It Still Happens..." Also, in 1888 the fair organization agreed to grant a 50' wide right-of-way into the fairgrounds to the Montana Central Railroad, thus preparing the way for efficient access to the grounds by exhibitors, racehorse owners and boxcars which later bore the coveted Kentucky earth.

²¹ "The Races" and "Preparations for the Fair", *Helena Weekly Herald*, July 5th 1871.

²² Meloy, "More from the Quarries..." Also, the State Fair Report of 1918 complains bitterly that the 1915 legislative act banning betting at the State Fair led to a significant reduction in revenues. Racing of various kinds took place at the Fair but only after legislative funding wobbled alarmingly in the mid '20s and Helena people subsidized the State Fair did betting return. See Montana State Board of Examiners Records, State Fair Reports, MHS Library and Edwards, ref. below.

²³ The abstract of title for the fairgrounds property (MHS Library papers, Reports to the Board of Examiners, State Fair Board) show consistent mortgages on the fairgrounds. To finance events, fair operators apparently borrowed money against the land. In 1896, the year fairs ended, a Sarah Britton was holding an 1894 mortgage for \$8,400. The owners defaulted and Ms. Britton sued, eventually securing ownership of the fairgrounds in 1897. She sold the property to Charles D. Hard that year and it was he who sold the fairgrounds to the State of Montana in 1903.

²⁴, Douglas Michael Edwards, "Exhibiting the Possibilities: The Montana State Fair", Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Montana State University, Bozeman, 1977 p.17.

²⁵ Montana State Fair, *Premium List and Program*, Helena, 1903.

²⁶ Meloy, "More from the Quarries..." and Edwards, p. 17.

²⁷ Jiusto, "It Still Happens..."

²⁸ Edwards, p. 8.

²⁹ Montana State Fair, *Premium List and Program*, Helena, 1916.

³⁰ Montana State Fair, *Premium List...*, 1909.

³¹ Montana State Fair, *Premium List...*, 1917 and 1920.

³² State Fair Board report to the State Board of Examiners, 1927. This report claims "No fair was held in 1925 or 1926 due to the fact that the Nineteenth Legislative Assembly did not appropriate funds for that purpose..." but Helena did hold a fair in 1925 and called it "Montana's 23d annual State fair...", one funded by area donors and a special county tax levy for that purpose. See "Fair Gates Will Swing Back Tomorrow, Good Time Is Promised To All" *Helena Independent*, September 6, 1925. No mention of a fair was found in the 1926 papers.

³³ Betty LaSalle, a long-time fairgrounds booster, reported this in an brief, undated fairgrounds history. Her association with people involved with the property would give credence to the fact there were rumors but not to the validity of those rumors. More telling, perhaps, are actions of the state to formalize reporting standards which at least indicate a need to monitor management during a deteriorating economic situation.

³⁴ State Fair Board Report

³⁵ C. R. Anderson and M. P. Martinson, Montana Earthquakes, Published by the Authors, 1936. p. 26.

³⁶ *Helena Independent*, November 1, 1935.

³⁷ Papers of the City Engineer, Helena, MT.

³⁸ *Helena Independent*, November 2, 1935.

³⁹ Sanborn Insurance Company, Map of Helena, Montana, 1930, annotated to 1951.

⁴⁰ "Improvement at Fairgrounds", *Helena Daily Independent*, August 27, 1915.

⁴¹ Sanborn Insurance Co. Map of Helena, 1930 annotated to 1951.

⁴² “Fair Grounds Leased,” Montana Newspaper Association Insert, April 26, 1937. The date, 1937, was the year the WPA moved its headquarters from Helena to Butte. If this meant the Fairgrounds lost its WPA support, it may have pressed the state to seek new uses for the grounds. As well as housing transients, federal relief agencies were very active in the city and from Sanborn evidence, used the fairgrounds extensively. Such organizations employed “hundreds of Helena people, extensively repaired the caption and the county courthouse and landscaped a city park. In 1935, the state headquarters of the Works Progress Administration gage office employment to more than 200 people and employed 275 on various projects in the city....” See: Federal Writers Project, *The WPA Guide to 1930s Montana*, Reprint by the University of Montana Press, Tucson & London, 1994. P. 165.

⁴³ Photographic Collection of the Lewis and Clark County Extension Office, Helena, Montana

⁴⁴ “Mother Berry’s Home Destroyed,” *Montana Newspaper Association*, Insert from the *Winnet Times*, November 8, 1937.

⁴⁵ Meloy, “More from the Quarries...”

⁴⁶ *Helena Independent Record*, October 16th 1966.

⁴⁷ All of the major barns and other structures are accounted for on the 1930 Sanborn Map and the 1938 aerial photograph.

⁴⁸ Montana State College and the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds Board, *General Plan, Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds, 1980*, pamphlet published by the authors, no date.

⁴⁹ Letter to the Montana Attorney General from the Lewis and Clark Fairgrounds Association, October 8, 1963.

⁵⁰ *Helena Independent Record*, November 8, 1991; May 21, 1997.
