

# A Tradition Worthy of a Blue Ribbon

BY SUSAN HUGHES



CAIRO HISTORICAL SOCIETY



COLUMBIA COUNTY AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

**P**ossibly one of the most time-honored community traditions in New York State is the county fair. Many fairgoers have fond memories of visiting the various barns to see animals they may only get to encounter once a year or wonder at the crafts and products in various exhibit buildings. Entertainment, such as harness racing and musical performances, have long been part of the attraction.

The Cattaraugus County Fair is held every year at the County Fairgrounds in the village of Little Valley. Created by the Cattaraugus County Agricultural Society in about 1843 to showcase community accomplishments in agriculture and household manufacturing, the county fair was held in various communities throughout the county. 1854 was the first year it was held in Little Valley, which eventually became its permanent site. On August 31,

1899, New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt spoke at the fairgrounds to a reported crowd of 15,000.

On June 24, 1841, the Saratoga County Agricultural Society formed in response to “an act to promote agriculture” passed by the New York State Legislature in May of that year. The society’s annual fair was first held in Ballston Spa, and later in Mechanicville and Saratoga Springs. In 1882, the society established its permanent fairgrounds in Ballston Spa.

The Cairo Fairgrounds allowed Greene County residents engaged in agriculture to show off the fruits of their labor and hard work. According to records of the former Greene County Agricultural Society, the fair was held annually in the town of Cairo beginning in 1819. The former fairgrounds site, where the historical marker is today, began hosting the Greene County Fair in 1870. An 1867 map

marks a racecourse at this location, indicating that racing activities were likely happening at the site before the county fair moved there. In 1934, the event was renamed the Rip Van Winkle Fair to reflect a new managing committee. In addition to racing and agricultural activities, events included a horseshoe pitching contest in which the winner advanced to the State Fair competition. Unfortunately, in 1936 the fairgrounds were sold in a foreclosure proceeding. When the grounds changed hands again in 1961, it reportedly had not hosted a county fair for nearly 20 years. However, in 1974 the fairgrounds were transformed into a speedway for stock car racing with a half-mile clay race-track. Opening day was August 18, with races held over the next six weeks.

In 1884, the Columbia County Agricultural Society erected a large exhibition hall on the county fairgrounds in Chatham, New York. The wood structure was covered by a hipped roof and topped with a large flagpole. A wrap-around porch offered shade to fairgoers. Located near the entrance, the building is still in use today. ■

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To view a short video of the 1974 Cairo Fairgrounds stock car racing event, scan the QR code below.



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