HISTORY OF TOPSFIELD FAIR DRAFT HORSE SHOW

Prior to 1980, the area south of the arena, and extending to the pedestrian gate traditionally known as "race rear", was primarily dedicated to racing activities. The building we now know as the "clubhouse" is situated at what was then, the northeast corner of a 1/2 mile track and was host to many forms of racing, including midget & full size auto racing, flat & harness horse racing and, finally, for many seasons of dog racing. In 1979, due to conflicting racing dates with other fairs, racing ceased at Topsfield Fair and the search for a replacement venue was spearheaded by then current President Nancy Begin. Alvin & Caroline Craig of Essex, had recently become involved in showing their draft horses at several new England fairs, and suggested a trial run at the 1980 Topsfield Fair. The show proved to be successful, drawing a good crowd of spectators, and the rest, as they say, is pretty much history. For several years, the show was held in the old infield area with a snow fence ring and stabling for 30 horses in a 40X80 tent directly behind the sheep barn. Stalls were built by fair maintenance staff utilizing some materials from the old grand stand before it was demolished in 1981. I remember that our first show ran late and well into the evening. With no lighting available, exhibitors' cars were lined up around the ring with their headlights on, while jingling trace chains and heavy rolling wagon wheels were the only sounds you heard coming from the ring before you actually saw any horses! For several years, fair management and directors had realized that a new livestock building was sorely needed if in fact some of the events at the Fair were not to be held hostage every year by inclement weather. 1988 was a very rainy year at the Fair, especially on the 2nd weekend. This meant that many of the Fair events and programs must be either moved or cancelled. In February of 1989, The Board of Directors voted to construct a new building large enough to accommodate several fair activities including the giant pumpkin weigh-off, horse & oxen pulling, rodeo, draft horse show, and youth cattle show.

For 25 years, from 1980 until 2005, the Topsfield Fair draft horse show continued to grow, from 30 horses to over 100. In some years, during award presentations we have

had as many as 12 six horse hitches in the arena at one time. Unfortunately, for the past 10 to 12 years, we have not had the strong number of exhibitors that we enjoyed in the past. We find that other fairs here in New England and the northeast are facing the same situation. Many exhibitors who have made showing draft horses a family affair, have found it increasingly difficult to find enough crew to go on the road with a hitch. Also, for the past 2 years, some of the large prestigious shows in the Midwest have had show dates which conflict with some of the fairs here in the east. Since 2018 is our 200th anniversary, we are working very hard to make this a year when we will see an increase in participation . Eastern States Exposition and Fryeburg Fair have show dates which match up well with Topsfield this year. We hope this will have a positive effect on entries. We are inviting some Haflingers (small drafts) to participate at Topsfield this year which will cut down on change over time between classes and give spectators more to watch. We are also taking out an ad in the Draft Horse Journal which we think will spark some national interest in the show.

For the duration of the fair and as an adjunct to the draft horse show, an exhibition hitch was housed in the arena. The hitch selected for this honor was the Hallamore Clydesdale Hitch, owned by Dennis Berry, and shown by Ned Niemic. The 8 horse hitch of beautiful Clydesdales became one of the favorite exhibits on the fairgrounds for many years. Unfortunately for the fair, the hitch was retired from the general circuit of shows In 2013. For the next 2 years, Percheron Thunder was a crowd pleaser. Currently, the exhibition hitch stalls are filled by Morrisville College, who shows a stunning hitch of Belgians. The draft horse program is a credit course at the college. Scott Seymore is head driver of the hitch, and during the 2017 fair, several students in the draft horse program ably interacted with the crowds, exchanging ideas and information about the use and care of their hitch. This year, Morrisville College will be competing in the draft horse show in addition to their daily parade of the fairgrounds and performing in the arena.