

# BLUE RIBBONS & COTTON CANDY

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It's county fair time and let your senses take it all in! The dazzling kaleidoscope of color - striped pavilions topped with pennants waving, garish neon lighting concourses, and whirling rides against the darkened sky. The taste of cotton candy and candy apples, a pork chop sandwich or a roasted turkey leg, and an ear of corn dripping in butter cannot be denied. The gentle strains of music wafting across the fairgrounds from the Park Stage, colliding with the roar of engines and crushing of metal from the demolition derby. This is the Marion County Fair, but there's more. Sheep, goats, horses, fowl, and Frisbee dogs; colorful and intricate 4-H displays; fine arts of brush and lens, and baked goods from the best home chefs of the county, all hoping for a blue ribbon.

For eighty-nine years the Marion County Fair has showcased the county's best in animals and produce, crafts and wares, along with entertainment, rides, and "fair food." Little has changed in the one hundred and fifteen years since Thomas Edison filmed *A Rube Couple at a County Fair* - a parade of cattle, horses dancing and leaping, carnies waving fairgoers into midway attractions, the ever-present Ferris wheel slowly spinning to the delight of young and old riders, tents displaying wares, and even a zip line.

The current fair had its simple beginnings in a carnival organized by the New Bethel [Wanamaker] Civic & Welfare Association to pay off the debt of the New Bethel Baptist Church. It expanded to a harvest festival in the following years, and by 1935 the leaders of the Franklin Township community established the Marion County Fair Association. By July 31 of that year, big tents had been "pitched on the fairground at the outskirts of the little village...and all the attractions that go to make a successful county fair...cattle, swine, and chickens...vegetables, 4-H Club handiwork, quilts, cakes and other things representative of Marion County agricultural life," together with automobiles and farm equipment, were in place. A midway of carnival attractions completed the scene. The four-day event featured horse riding and jumping events, a pie eating contest, a bicycle race, and a horse pulling contest. Musical entertainment was provided by the American Legion Junior Band, the Sahara Grotto Drum and Bugle Corps, *The Indianapolis News* Newsboys Band, and the Boy Scout German Band. Ribbons, cash, and merchandise prizes were given to winning exhibitors.

While today's Marion County Fair has almost ninety continuous years to its credit and long ago moved to more spacious grounds along Troy Av at Five Points Rd and Southeastern Av, it is heir to a tradition that began in 1835 when the Marion County Agricultural Society was organized and sponsored the first fair which was held on the court house grounds on the last day of October 1835. The fair continued as an annual two-day event through the end of the decade.

In 1851 the Marion County Agricultural Society was revived with Indianapolis attorney and civic leader Calvin Fletcher as president and directors from each of the county's nine townships. The following year, two weeks before the state fair, a Marion County Fair was held at the state fairgrounds (today's Military Park) from Monday thru Wednesday, October 5-7, with a

“good exhibition of stock, farming implements, and products of the farm and orchard.” This second version of the county fair was popular. School children were given a one-day “holiday” to “visit the County Fair,” and a newspaper announcement said, “Parents should provide them with the ‘wherewithal’ to obtain admission.” While the central purpose of the fair was to show the best of the county’s agricultural, horticultural, mechanical, and domestic wares, the fair was also entertaining. A mule race - “some went pretty fast, some slowly, and one, after trotting a short distance stopped...” - was a popular feature at these fairs, and Prof. Bannister, “one of the most daring and intelligent Aeronats in America,” made a balloon ascension at the 1859 fair.

By the fall of 1860, the *Indianapolis Daily Journal* noted, “Agricultural fairs are not largely attended this year. Political excitement and the holding of large meetings have taken from the exhibitions...the interest that generally attaches to them.” For the rest of the decade, the Civil War and the ensuing turmoil did not provide conducive conditions for a county fair.

The Marion County Fair, advertised as the Indianapolis Fair, returned in September 1870 to the delight of the large crowds in attendance. The six-day exhibition, sponsored by the Indianapolis Agricultural and Mechanical Association at the state fair ground, featured hogs, cattle, horses, mules, and sheep, manufactured products, fine arts and crafts, fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Horse races, trotting matches, and mule races entertained fair-goers, the results often unexpected and leading to “an immense deal of grumbling, and a good deal of money” changing hands. New grounds (today’s Garfield Park) were acquired one mile south of the city and another Indianapolis Fair was held the following year. However, it passed into time, and a smaller Marion County Fair was held indoors at the Masonic Hall, southeast corner Washington and Tennessee (Capitol) Streets in June 1872.

Valley Mills, in Decatur Township, was the 1876 site of the fourth annual Marion County Fair sponsored by the Marion County Agricultural Society. By the end of the seventies the county fair had become a popular event, and reflecting the growing segregation of the times, the Marion County Colored Agricultural Society was organized and held its first fair in August 1879. However, by the early eighties interest in a Marion County fair had waned and would remain dormant well into the twentieth century.

In August 1907, the International County Fair was held on the grounds of the Physio-Medical College, Thirteenth St and College Av, to benefit the Summer Mission for Sick Children. While promoted as a “county fair,” it primarily provided various entertainments and little of the traditional county fair elements. By 1912, the fair gave way to other means of fundraising. In the ensuing years other “county fair” events were held, but it was not until the organization of the Marion County Fair Association in the thirties that the award of premiums for the best in agriculture, horticulture, fine arts and crafts, and domestic arts were united with midway attractions.

For ten days this month, fairgoers can leisurely wander across the Marion County fairgrounds and experience an Indiana tradition that generations of Hoosiers have enjoyed. Let your senses go wild at the Marion County Fair!



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