

# New England Fairs

**Robert P. Trask**

*Director, Division of Fairs, Massachusetts Department of Agriculture*

Don't let anyone tell you that the old-time agricultural fair has gone, along with ox-drawn plows and the horse and buggy—275 agricultural organizations and 2 million people say “no”. That is the number of fairs scheduled to be held in New England this year and the number of people who will visit them, according to the estimates of the various State departments of agriculture. They are in a position to know, because in most New England States there are appropriations of prizes to be distributed at these fairs and records of attendance and exhibits are pretty accurately kept.

Beginning with Northern Maine Fair at Presque Isle the first week in August, and ending with the Satucket Horse and Agricultural Fall Show at East Bridgewater, Mass., on October 12, New England offers to the fair-minded public a greater number and a greater variety of agricultural exhibitions than any other section of the United States.

There has been a great resurgence of interest in fairs since the war, both on the part of exhibitors and patrons. Fair management has learned to study the varied interests of the general public to provide more kinds of entertainment as well as more attractive exhibits, so that people who are not agriculturally minded—and that means 90 percent of the people who attend New England fairs—enjoy a more varied and interesting program than they can find in a day spent at any other outdoor spectacle.

Different fairs feature different events. For example, most Maine and Vermont fairs offer a full program of harness horse racing every day, with many local horse owners participating. In Massachusetts, with a few exceptions, the crowds go for the runners, and seven major fairs conduct running horse races under the pari-mutuel system with substantial revenues for themselves and for the Commonwealth. Incidentally, Massachusetts' share of the profits from wagering at fairs is allocated to an agricultural-purposes fund which provides prize money for all the fairs in the State.

There is no doubt that some of the increased interest in exhibiting at fairs can be ascribed to the large cash premiums now being made available. New Hampshire allots one-fourth of 1 percent of the State's income from pari-mutuel betting for prizes at fairs. Maine has just passed a law which permits fairs to operate pari-mutuel wagering, and Connecticut, where there is no legalized betting, has a bill now pending in the general court that will set up \$25,000 annually for prizes.

The granges of New England have recently become very active in their support of exhibitions of agriculture and domestic arts. In Massachusetts alone 95 granges conduct fairs of their own, many of them attracting several thousand patrons each year. Particularly helpful to the major fairs has been the interest among granges in

competing among themselves for rather liberal prizes offered for grange displays. These displays have become the outstanding feature at a dozen fairs with as many as 10 to 15 granges competing. They are judged by score cards with credit being given for variety, quality, and central feature, and some of the most ingenious and artistic exhibits have made hall exhibits at these fairs outstanding in their interest to the general public.

As evidence of the trend toward use of mechanical equipment on all New England farms a new department has come to the fore at all fairs, and that is farm machinery and modern labor-saving equipment for the farm home. Interest in these exhibits is not limited to farm people by any means. A recent survey made at the great Eastern States Exposition by a nationally known agency developed the astounding fact that 88 percent of the people visiting the grounds made it a point to spend a great deal of time at the commercial and farm machinery exhibits.

All of this is very pleasing to fair managers because this is the only important attraction that brings customers through the gates and pays for the privilege.

Notwithstanding the fact that a majority of New England farms are without a working team of horses, and a team of oxen is unknown in many sections, they still turn up in large numbers at every fair where there is a pulling contest and fair boards recognize them as a great drawing card by offering larger prizes for these contests than any other exhibition on the grounds. It is a well-known fact that no matter what exciting feature may be in progress, when the pulling contest is announced people come hurrying from all directions to get a choice seat where they can hear the comments of the drivers and see the action. As a matter of fact, most fair grounds are woefully limited in their facilities for seating crowds that want to see the pulling contests. A few have been smart enough to put these contests inside the track in front of the grandstand.

At one fair 36 yoke of oxen showed up for one contest. At another the horse pulling started at 10 a. m., continued all day, and the finals were put on a night in front of the grandstand under the floodlights. Hundreds went home for supper and came back to see the finish. So it looks like some of the oldest contests known to man are still crowd-pleasing.

Probably there is nothing that has done more to rejuvenate the fairs of New England than the active participation of 4-H Club members and the Future Farmers of America. These young people are trained to grow and recognize fine products, their interests are varied, they are great competitors and they bring the whole family to the fair to watch them in their judging and showmanship contests and participate in their thrills as they are awarded their ribbons.