

The Vermont Farm Show- A Long Tradition in Agriculture

The Vermont Farm Show was formed by the old Vermont Dairymen's Association and Maple Sugar Makers' Association meeting.

In 1930, the Memorial Auditorium in Burlington was only a few years old and the Dairymen's and Maple Sugar Makers' winter meetings had been held there.

Orlando Martin of Plainfield had served as Secretary of the Dairymen's Association for several years. He published a small program booklet containing a few advertisements and sold exhibit space to a half dozen or more dairy and farm equipment people along the outside walls of the basement of the Auditorium. The income from the advertising and exhibit space was used to cover program speaker expenses, printing expense of the booklet and sharing in program expense for the sister organization known as Wives and Daughters of Vermont Dairymen who met with them in the three- or four-day event.



In late 1930, probably in December, Orlando Martin asked Harold Dwinell, Director of the Department of Agriculture, Division of Markets, if he would put on an educational exhibit in the basement of the Auditorium. Then Commissioner of Agriculture, Edward H. Jones, considered it an excellent opportunity to publicize the Department and the newly created Division of Markets.

It happened that in 1930 sugar makers were just beginning to use glass for packing syrup; that potato growers were just beginning to experiment with packing potatoes in 15-pound bags for sale in stores; and that poultry farmers were just beginning to use cartons for packing eggs for sale in stores. So, Mr. Dwinell made a display of syrup in special glass syrup bottles; and potatoes in specially made burlap peck bags; a dozen eggs in both 3x4 and 2x6 cartons quite fancily colored and marked; and Macintosh apples in colored baskets of peck size. The display was placed on a table against a section of wall with Division of Market identification.

Mr. Dwinell lost little time before discussing the idea of a products competition with Commissioner Jones and other prominent Vermont agriculturists of the time. The resulting consensus was "Let's go".

A solicitation of the then active farm organizations soon had \$100 from Farm Bureau, Grange, Horticulture, Society, Potato Growers Association, the Maple Sugar Makers', Dairymen's Associations, and a few individuals.

For the first time, Vermont Farm Products Contest was launched in 1932, three years prior to the first Vermont Farm Show. About 50 entries were displayed just outside the ropes of the fighting ring in the center of the Burlington Memorial Auditorium basement. Extension Service, Experiment Station and Department of Agriculture personnel served as judges.

It seemed like all members of the families of the exhibitors, their relatives, and friends came to see how their entries made out. The general attendance at the meetings of the dairyman and sugar makers was the largest ever. Potato growers asked "Why can't we have a program?" Poultry growers asked if in another year they could have a program also. And the apple growers, although the Horticulture Society usually held a meeting later in the Spring, suggested they would like to have a program. Discussions led to the belief that there should be a new overall organization to operate the whole affair in which all of the Vermont farm enterprise organizations could participate.

UVM Agricultural College Dean, Joseph Carrigan and Commissioner Jones had discussed for some time the possibility of drawing the various agricultural enterprise organizations in Vermont into a council through which a large mid-winter show could be held, and Ed Jones was the moving spirit in bringing it about.

Mr. Carrigan, Commissioner Jones, and Harold Dwinell can rightfully be called the founders of the Vermont Farm Show. Their efforts led to the formation of the Vermont Union Agricultural Council. It was organized for the purpose of unifying the efforts of the several agricultural organizations, in conducting a winter-time Union agricultural meeting in which each of the member organizations could participate. Its chief objective was to foster the Farm Products Show and to conduct a commercial and educational exhibit of farm and home equipment and supplies.

The Council thoroughly established itself in the first Union Agricultural Program held at Burlington in January 1935. The Council membership included the Vermont Dairymen's Association, Vermont Maple Sugar Makers' Association, Vermont Poultry and Egg Producers' Association, Vermont Certified Seed Potato Growers' Association and Vermont Horticultural Society. The active executive delegates were the President and Secretary of each organization, the Commissioner of Agriculture, and the Director of the Extension Service. The Director of the Bureau of Markets was made general manager. The 1935 meetings were an outstanding success in every respect with every member organization participating both in the program and with an educational exhibit. Every available space for exhibits was used by commercial concerns.

In 1938, The Vermont Agricultural Extension Service noted in its annual report that the Vermont Farm Products Show was having a pronounced effect throughout the state in stimulating the production of quality hay. During 1937, hay instruction had been added to the agricultural

curriculum statewide. Approximately 65 samples of hay were judged at the show; comprised of 4 classes, Timothy, Timothy-Clover, Alfalfa, and mixed hay. In conjunction with the show, the 5th Annual Rural Electrification Institute was held in Burlington under the supervision of the Extension Engineer, with the theme "Electric Power as a Farm Business Proposition".

The Union Agricultural Meetings and Farm Products Show continued to grow and prosper in Burlington through 1946. The Show continued every year except 1943 and 1944 when wartime restrictions prevented the event from being held. Gas rationing went into effect in October, 1942. An "A" sticker allowed enough gas to drive 150 miles monthly and a "B" sticker allowed 200 miles per month. The agricultural fairs were back up and running in 1945 but sugar continued to be rationed until June of 1947, spurring continued maple production for home use.

The war finally ended and slowly our boys came home. By 1947, the Vermont Department of Agriculture reported 11,206 dairy farms in the state but The Memorial Auditorium in Burlington had been leased to the Veterans Administration. So that same year, the Union Agricultural Meetings and Farm Products Contest were moved to the Barre Municipal Auditorium where they were held until 2012.

Even before Thunder Road, the Barre "Aud" was a site of excitement as the home of the state basketball championships and The Vermont Farm Show. Downtown merchants planned sales for visiting families and local churches held special dinners and suppers as well as providing additional meeting spaces. Parking was truly at a premium everywhere in Barre during the snowy 1950's. For a time, the Farm Show used school busses to transport visitors from various parking locations.

In November, 1957, the Vermont Farm Show, Inc. was officially organized and incorporated. The official by laws of the organization were revised and adopted at a meeting held May 15, 1979. For many years, Barre's location in central Vermont, with easy access to the newly created interstate highway system brought visitors from the south and north to the midwinter show. For several years after moving to Barre, the four-day show and meetings were held in February, but since the early 80's the show has been scheduled for the last Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of January. Attendance at the 75th Farm Show was recorded at over 10,000 visitors per day.

For years one of the most popular events at the Vermont Farm Show was the Political Pull, a milking contest that pitted state legislators against each other. In 2011, the Political Pull became the Capital Cook-Off and moved the challenge from the milking parlor to the kitchen. The premise: three teams from the Vermont House and Senate agriculture committees and VAAFM, compete in an "Iron Chef"-style challenge and create a dish from a bag of Vermont-based ingredients. The Capital Cook-Off coincided with the annual Consumer Night, where 65 vendors,

all with Vermont made products, offered free samples and made sales to hundreds of visitors. It's one part farmers market, one part fun political event which grows each year, proving the diversity and vibrancy of Vermont agriculture.

Due to interior space constraints and parking constrictions at the Barre site, the Show moved to the Champlain Valley Exposition grounds in Essex Junction, Vermont for the 2012 show. The new, more spacious venue provided a better experience for guests and exhibitors alike according to Farm Show management. Over 150 exhibitors participated in the 2014 show, with more requests for space than is available inside. We credit that boom to the growth in Vermont's diversified agricultural sector, which has generated new products from farmers and new markets for those products.

Since the relocation to the Fairgrounds, the show has grown. At capacity again this year, both inside and outside, there is a waiting list of vendors and exhibitors. Consumer Night events, including the Buy Local Market continue to amaze with a ever widening array of Vermont grown, handcrafted, brewed and inspired commodities. The Capital Cook-off featured three teams, with Dept. of Agriculture winning with a goat stew served over turnips. This winter evening is a fun filled family event for both rural and urban Vermonters.

Due to personnel changes in 2016, Product Contests were managed by the respective associations. The Vermont Beekeepers, Vermont Sugarmakers, Vermont Sheep & Goat Association, The VT- NH Christmas Tree Growers with the UVM Extension Service managed their own contests and provided an opportunity for the public to see and hear about their efforts in producing quality Vermont products.

2016 brought a new look to our agricultural scene, the helipad next to the tractors and large cropping equipment found outside. Mt. Mansfield Heli-flight uses the helicopter to seed cover crops by air. This process is another tool in our combined effort to care for and maintain the states lakes, rivers, and streams.

The 2021 Vermont Farm Show was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on in-person gatherings in Vermont.

A Look Back at the 1993 Vermont Farm Show



<https://youtu.be/mqPPR9VGoTA>

This video about the 1993 Vermont Farm Show was produced in 1993 by Betty Ann and Don Lockhardt and their production company Perceptions. It is available courtesy of Vermont State Archives and Records.