

# California State Fair!

by  
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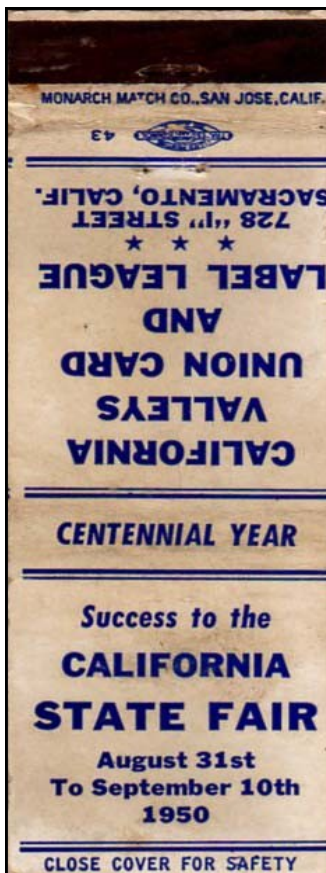
Whenever I think of this topic, I always think of that great old 1950s musical, *State Fair*, which was along the line of *Oklahoma* in case you never had the opportunity to see it. Crowds, music, food, displays, animals...August is State Fair time, and thousands will be laying down their dollars to see the exhibits, taste the food, and ride the rides, but few fair attendees, I dare say, know much about the history of California's largest fair. That's too bad because it's a long and varied history and well worth noting.

It was 143 years ago that the tradition started. Two years earlier, San Francisco's *Alta California* (California's first daily newspaper) had run an editorial calling for the establishment of an agricultural society whose purpose would be to put on an exposition to showcase the state's agricultural products. In 1854, the first California State Fair was held in the San Francisco Music hall at Bush and Montgomery Streets, with horse racing being held at the old Pioneer course between 24th and 26th Streets.

Sacramento hosted the State Fair the following year, but in those days it was a traveling show, and so the event was held in temporary structures at 6th and M Streets. In 1856, the State Fair was held in San Jose, in Stockton the following year, and in Marysville the year after. A Sacramento reporter, by the way, wrote that it took him *nine* hours of dusty riding to get to the Fair in Stockton...50 miles away!

In 1859, the State Fair was again held in Sacramento, and local citizens, feeling that the state's capital was the proper place for such an event, held a special election and approved a one-quarter of one percent property tax to raise funds for the purchase of a permanent Fair site. The 1859 State Fair was held in the same location as in 1855, and in 1861 an amendment to the State Constitution permanently established Sacramento as the home of the Fair. The new site was on 20 acres, bounded by E and H, 20th and 22nd Streets.

In those days, the Fair was a somewhat tenuous



proposition. Fair officials, much like local schools today, often did not know how much money the state legislature was going to give them to work with until the last minute. In 1864, the Legislature failed to approve any money at all. A drought had cut short the harvests and made it hard to find grazing land. Hardly a good year for a fair. There was a fair, but it was reduced to a horse show! Attendance was down in 1893 because of the World's Fair in Chicago that year, and the San Francisco earthquake and fire gobbled up all the headlines in 1906...but both bookmaking and booze were outlawed at the fairgrounds that year, so that may have had something to do with the less than normal attendance!

National and international news often competes with the Fair for public attention. Both Garfield and McKinley were assassinated during State Fair Week, and the Second World War closed down the fair for five years.

Newspapers on the East Coast and in Europe featured stories about the California State Fair. Reports of 24-foot-high cornstalks and melons as big as a man made the Europeans laugh, but a delegation of Fair officials went to Paris in 1867 with some of the giant vegetables and fruit. There was no more laughing...instead, the delegates brought home three French medals and other European awards!

There were several events and exhibits that were exceptionally popular over the years. The display of resins, tars and rectified spirits of turpentine packed in the crows in 1863 [*why, I have absolutely no idea!*]. The “genuine test of milch cows for butterfat” did the same in 1895, as did the exhibit of artificial limbs in 1902, and the office furniture exhibit from San Quentin Prison in 1926.

By the late 1940s, growth was once again a problem, and it was decided a new site was needed. A tract of 1,000 acres along the American River northeast of the city was purchased as a potential site. The Fair eventually moved to its present Cal Expo home in 1968. Originally designed to

be a year-round exposition of which the State Fair would be just one element, Cal Expo got off to a rocky start. After an unsuccessful 58-day run as Cal Expo in 1974, and several administrative changes over the years, the California State Fair came back in its own right. By 1977, the Fair was being attended by three-quarters of a million people. Today, the California State Fair is consistently one of the largest in the nation. Incidentally, just to show you why people talk about “the good ol’ days,” admission to the Fair in 1976 was \$2; this month it’s \$7, and that doesn’t include the horse racing and all of the other attractions that it did in 1976.

The California State Fair covers pictured on the previous page are the only ones I have, and the only ones I know of, but I would assume there would have been others issued over the years. I envision something like a very attractive and colorful 1950s Royal Flash. Check your collections of Fairs, Famous Places, and the like, and see if you have any California State Fair covers. If you find any, send me a clear photocopy, and we’ll run them for others to see. Perhaps we can get a “fair” idea of how many there really are!

