



# An American Tour: 167



## Oregon's State Fairs

As Oregon agriculture expanded in the early 19th century, many communities formed agricultural associations for the purpose of sharing information on farming and resources. These groups began to organize county fairs, such as the Yamhill County Fair (1850). Shortly thereafter, the *Oregon Farmer* began calling for a statewide fair. A group of farmers known as the Oregon Fruitgrowers Association organized the first unofficial state fair in 1858. That year is recognized as the official anniversary year of the fair.

In 1860, the association merged with other county groups and became the Oregon State Agricultural Society, who held the first official fair in 1861 in the Gladstone/Oregon City area. It was felt a larger area was needed and following a proposal by the Marion County Agriculture Society, the second official state fair was held in Salem in 1862 on the grounds of the Marion County Fair, where it has remained ever since. Homesteader John Savage donated 8 acres of his land, which was three miles outside of Salem at the time, while pioneer John Minto contributed \$1,200 to build a wooden fence around the grounds. The fairgrounds were annexed into Salem in 1921.

The fair has been held every year on the same site, except in 1905, because the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition was taking place in Portland that year, and during the World War II years of 1943 and 1944. Also, although the 1942 fair was held, it was scaled back to only include 4-H displays, livestock exhibits, and displays from 27 Oregon counties, so it was not considered an official State Fair. The fair was also canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 1967, an arson occurred just before the opening of the fair, burning several large structures. Along with the fair commissioners, Governor Tom McCall felt the fair should go on, so many groups donated time and money for the cleanup and sent facilities like tents from as far away as the Portland Rose Festival so the fair could open.

The state fairground is the site of two historic buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places: the Oregon State Fair Stadium and Poultry Building Ensemble. The 1919 horse stadium and the 1921 poultry building were added to the register in 2002. The poultry building is known for the "chicken head" relief sculptures that decorate the exterior. The horse stadium is the oldest state building in Oregon in continuous use. [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oregon\\_State\\_Fair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oregon_State_Fair)]

