

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 91000073

Date Listed: 2/28/91

Wells County Fairgrounds
Property Name

Wells County NORTH DAKOTA
County State

Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Patrick Andrus
for) Signature of the Keeper

2/28/91
Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

The following amendments were made to this nomination:

Section No. 3: The two 1960 gateposts were changed from contributing to non-contributing structures.

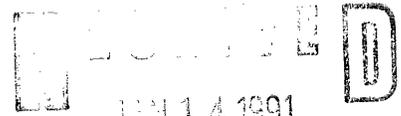
Section No. 8: Criteria Consideration B (for moved structures) was checked. Architecture was added as an Area of Significance.

These changes were confirmed by phone with the North Dakota SHPO (2/28/91).

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

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National Park Service



National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

NATIONAL
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Wells County Fairgrounds
other names/site number NA

2. Location

street & number Intersection of U.S. 52 & ND Highway 15 NA not for publication
city, town Fessenden NA vicinity
state North Dakota code ND county Wells code 103 zip code 58438

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<u>18</u>	<u>8</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>2</u>	<u> </u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>1</u>	<u> </u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u> </u>	<u> </u> objects
		<u> </u>	<u> </u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: NA

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

James E. Sherry
Signature of certifying official State Historic Preservation Officer (ND) 12/31/90
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:) _____

Patricia Andrews 2/28/91

for Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)
Recreation and Culture - fair

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)
Recreation and Culture - fair

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

NA

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete
walls weatherboard
granite
roof shingle
other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Wells County Fairgrounds sits on a tract of approximately 35 acres at the south edge of Fessenden, the county seat. The fairgrounds has been at this location since 1907. Originally 25 acres in size, the fairgrounds was expanded by two separate five acre purchases, the first in 1934 and the second in 1942. Fairgrounds site boundaries are defined by North Dakota Highway 15 and U.S. Highway 52 on the north and west, respectively. The southern boundary is defined by a windbreak. A wire fence surrounds the complex except for a short unfenced stretch at the southern end of its eastern boundary. Cut stone corner posts are located at the northeast corner of the fairgrounds and at what was the southwest corner of the fairgrounds when it was expanded to the south in 1934. Cut stone gate posts at its northwest corner usher visitors into the fairgrounds.

Whether approaching from the South, along U. S. 52, or the East, along N. D. 15, the traveler's attention is drawn to the fairgrounds complex by the size and number of buildings and structures comprising it. The large white-painted wooden stock barns, most obvious from the southerly approach, sit on an east-west rise toward the south end of the fairgrounds. They overlook the race track and grandstands to the north which are oriented on a north/south axis. From the eastern approach the race track and grandstands dominate the view. Whether approaching from the south or east the casual visitor can have little doubt that the complex is a fairgrounds, even if he should miss the "Wells County Fairgrounds" emblazoned in large black letters on the wall of the largest stock barn, located at the southwest corner of the complex, or the arched "Wells County Fair" sign supported by large stone gate posts at the northwest entrance to the complex.

Granite, found extensively through central North Dakota as glacial till, in addition to its use for fairgrounds gate and corner posts, is also used in the complex's most arresting feature - Festival Hall. Two buildings in the fairgrounds complex are modern metal-sided storage structures of the type rapidly replacing wooden farm buildings and locally known generically as "Butler Buildings." Most of the buildings in the complex, however, are of wood frame construction with drop siding as the exterior sheathing material. Four buildings, three of them barns (#s 19, 22, and 28) and the 4-H building (#2) are characterized by monitor roofs. The first barn building in the complex (#27), moved from its original location, also had a monitor roof as late as 1973, but by 1978 it had been removed.

A number of physical changes have occurred in the Wells County Fairgrounds since its establishment 83 years ago. There exist, however, several constants: race-track location; the original (ca. 1907) grandstand remains (though moved slightly north to accommodate the "new" 1925 grandstand); the Home Economics Building (consistently

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called the "Women's building" by our local male informants); and the use, which continues to this day, of the space to the west of the race track as the fair's midway.

Stock pens and cattle barns were originally aligned on a north-south axis along the western edge of the property boundary. A large horse barn sat at the very southern end of this alignment and at a ninety degree angle to it. In 1934 the county acquired five acres immediately south of the original fairgrounds; the stock pens were demolished and the barns were moved to the south edge of this newly acquired property. The aforementioned horse barn, now substantially altered in appearance is shown at its new location as #27 on the sketch map. In 1935 a large barn, 80' x 80', was constructed. This is building #19 on the sketch map. Also constructed during the depression years was Festival Hall (1938). A WPA project, it was purportedly designed by Wells County agent and fair manager, E. W. Vancura. The main floor of the 136' x 44' building is comprised of a wooden-floored auditorium with a large stage at its north end and a very small stage midway along the building's west wall. The basement was designed to house industrial exhibits during the annual county fair. Vehicular access to the basement exists via a ramp at the north end of the building.

In 1942 the fairgrounds was once again expanded through purchase of five acres to the south; it is the southern boundary of this acquisition which forms the southern boundary of the present fairgrounds complex.

The fairgrounds complex contains twenty-nine resources, of which twenty-one are contributing and eight are non-contributing. Of the non-contributing resources, four (#s 4, 8, 17, and 25) are of relatively recent construction and utilize materials uncharacteristic of the historical elements of the complex. One of the non-contributing resources (#24) cannot be dated with any degree of accuracy, and has in any event been so recently altered as to make it ineligible for lack of integrity. Resource #27, though one of the earliest buildings in the complex, has suffered so much integrity loss from the removal of a monitor roof and its replacement with a metal roof containing fiberglass panel skylights and replacement of its original siding on the north, east and west walls that it is classified as non-contributing. Features # 15 and 16 were moved onto the site in ca. 1985 and 1972 respectively and were not in anyway associated with county fair functions prior to that time; they are, consequently, considered non-contributing resources also.

Of the twenty-one contributing resources two (#5 and #29) are structures and one (#1) is classified herein as an object. It deserves particular mention. First, it is composed of a gate located at the northwest corner of the complex and two corner markers, respectively located at the northeast corner of the complex and the other at

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what was the southwest corner of the complex following the 1934 fairgrounds expansion from 25 to 30 acres. Second, according to a local informant they were constructed ca. 1960, and are, consequently, outside the Wells County Fairgrounds period of significance. It is possible that our local informant is in error regarding the construction date, but not likely. Constructed of cut granite, they serve as pleasing accents to Festival Hall. Were it not for the testimony of our informant they might logically be thought to date from the same period and be associated with the same WPA construction activities on the site as is Festival Hall.

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Fairgrounds - Contributing Resources

Please note that we have taken the unorthodox approach of listing in the right hand column below the sources from which historical information, such as construction dates, has been derived. This step was taken as a convenience for future state use of the completed nomination for research purposes.

Buildings numbers are coded to sketch map.

No.	Description	Sources
1 -	Fairgrounds entry gate, and corner posts. Front gate built ca. 1960. Corner and gate posts presumably constructed at same time. Stones used were purportedly from cattle barn, where it had been used as flooring in stalls.	Duane Larson, 3/5/90
2 -	4-H Club building. Constructed 1929. Wood frame. 36 1/2' x 78 1/2' Monitor roof. Drop siding. Exterior wooden staircase on south wall.	
	Construction contract awarded on May 24, 1929 to L. M. Miller "for the material and construction of exhibit and club building for \$2790.00." (WCFP May 30, 1929, p. 1 & 2.) This is the building described in the WCFP (May 2, 1929), when notices for bids were published, as "The Club building [which] will house the 4-H Club and agricultural exhibits this year and it is planned to provide dining and sleeping quarters in the second story for the Junior Club members who hold their annual convention during the fair. The building will be 36 feet wide by 80 feet long, located on the northwest part of the grounds." The 4-H building was under construction by May 30 (WCFP, May 30, 1929, p. 1). Today the second floor is used for storage year around.	
3 -	Caretakers House. Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 11' x 16 1/2'. Drop siding.	Duane Larson, 3/5/90

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Originally located on county shop yard which was approximately 1 1/2 blocks NE of Fairgrounds. Moved to its present location 20-25 years ago and used for some time as residence for fairgrounds caretaker. Presently used for storage.

- 5 - **Well.** Assumed construction date: 1935. Fieldstone walls; wood frame superstructure. 7' diameter.

6/27/35, p. 1
Wells County
Free Press

This structure houses a drinking fountain, quite possibly, though certainly not conclusively, the one reported as having been "installed at the Old Settler's building prior to the 1935 fair.

- 6 - **Old Settler's Building.** Constructed 1935. Wood frame. Drop siding. Octagonal building with a surrounding porch. Outer edge of porch is 15 1/2' on a side and 7' deep.

6/13/35, p. 1,
Wells County
Free Press

- 7 - **4-H Snack Shack.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 25 x 17. Drop siding.

Duane Larson
aerial photos

This was originally a safety station and called the Red Cross building. It was located midway down west property boundary of the fairgrounds complex. The concrete pad on which it originally sat still exists. The building was moved to its present location between 1971 and 1973. and 11/73.

- 9 - **Ticket Booth.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 11' x 5 1/2'. Butted siding.

The building is mounted on wooden skids for easy transport from one location to another on the fairgrounds.

- 10 - **Large Grandstand.** Constructed 1926. Wood frame. 40' x 120'. Drop siding.

Fessenden
Diamond Jubilee,
1893-1968;
1929 Sanborn
map

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- 11 - **Small Grandstand.** Constructed 1907. Wood frame. 40' x 84 1/2'. Drop siding.

Moved north to its present location in 1926 to accommodate construction of a new grandstand. In ca. 1975 a 25' side plywood sheathed shed roof addition extending along the grandstand's west wall was constructed. Roof trusses appear non-original and the original roof sheathing has been replaced with plywood. However, the roof shape closely approximates, if not duplicates, the original.

Shows on photo labelled 1908 in Wells Co. His. Soc. Museum, Fessenden; 1929 Sanborn map; 8/2/07, p. 1, Wells County Free Press

- 12 - **Restrooms.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 17' x 17'. Drop siding.

One of two restroom buildings originally located along the west property, it was moved to its present location between 1973 and 1978.

Aerial photos

- 13 - **Racing Commission Building.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 19 1/2' x 45'.

The building has been at this location since at least 1969

- 14 - **Festival Hall.** Constructed 1938. Cut granite fieldstone. 36' x 144'.

Purportedly designed by E.W. Vancura, Wells County Agent and fair manager, this building was constructed as part of a large WPA improvement at the fairgrounds.

Fessenden Diamond Jubilee, 1893-1968,
p. 45

- 18 - **Home Economics Building (Women's Building).** Constructed 1908. Wood frame. Cruciform plan with a 24' x 24' two story central block and 24' x 24' single story wings. Drop siding.

Photo 7/3/08, p. 1, 7/10/08, p. 1, and 6/13/35, p. 1 Wells County Free Press

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- 19 - **4-H Barn.** Constructed 1934. Woodframe. 80' x 80'.
Drop siding.

5/10/34, p. 1
Wells County
Free Press
Fessenden
Diamond
Jubilee, 1893-
1968, p. 27.

- 20 - **Unnamed Building.** Construction date unknown.
Wood frame. 10' x 8 1/2'. Drop siding.

This building is also mounted on skids for easy
movement around the fairgrounds.

- 21 - **Restrooms.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame.
17' x 17'. Drop siding.

Aerial photos

This building was moved ca. 1975 from a point approximately
150' southeast to its present location.

- 22 - **Horse Barn.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame.
82' x 45'. Drop siding.

The building is presently being used for race horses;
it was previously used as a draft horse barn. It is not
shown on the 1929 Sanborn map, but is evident on the 1959
aerial photograph of the fairgrounds. This barn is consid-
ered likely contemporary with #19 because its monitor roof
is very similarly proportioned.

- 23 - **Barn.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 28' x 79'.
Drop siding.

- 26 - ~~Outhouse~~ **Outhouse.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 11 1/4' x 5 1/2'.
Drop siding.

- 28 - ~~Barn~~ **Barn.** Constructed ca. 1935. Wood frame. 62' x 50 1/2'.
Drop siding.

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This 14 stall barn has an 8 1/2' wide shed roof addition along the full length of the building's west side.

- 29 - **Track.** The dirt oval track has been in its present location since 1907. The high wooden fence of butted board pickets may be the same which was reported as "enclos[ing] the west side of the race track on both ends of the grandstand" (WCFP, 7/7/32, p. 1, reporting on that year's fairgrounds improvements.) This fence is considered to be an integral feature of the track, and as such is an element which contributes to the track's significance as a part of the district. On the other hand, the inside rail of the track and that portion of the outside rail which constructed of welded pipe are considered characteristics of the track which do not contribute to its significance as part of the district.

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Fairgrounds - Noncontributing Resources

- 4 - **Historical Society Annex #2.** Constructed 1987. Steel frame. 48' x 107'. Metal siding. Gus Fuhrman
3/6/90

- 8 - **Catholic Church Stand building.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 39 x 56. Plywood panel exterior siding. Aerial photos

The building has been on this site since 1969.

- 15 - **Pony Gulch School.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 17' x 28'. Drop siding. Aerial photos

The building was moved from its original location several miles southwest of Fessenden in ca. 1985 by the Wells County Historical Society for use as an historic school museum to interpret rural education in early 20th Century North Dakota.

- 16 **Emrick School.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 44' x 40'. Drop siding. Aerial photos;
Fessenden
Diamond Jubilee,
1893-1968.

The building was moved to its present location ca. 1972 by the Wells County Historical Society for use as a museum building.

- 17 - **Historical Society Annex #1.** Constructed ca. 1975. Steel frame. 42' x 104'. metal siding. Aerial photos;
1929 Sanborn
map; 7/14/38,
p. 1. Wells
County Free
Press

The building, which was erected to house an expanding county historical society museum collection, is located exactly on the site of a ca 1921 wood frame, roofless dance pavilion, or bowery. The dance pavilion was gone by 1969, and was likely removed shortly after construction of Festival Hall, which was used for dances each night during the annual fair as soon as

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it was completed in 1938.

- 24 - **Race Horse Barn.** Construction date unknown. Wood frame. 22 1/2' x 79'. Plywood siding.

This building is either a new or substantially remodelled building. While a building has been on this site since at least 1959, by 1971 it had been either shortened by half or replaced by another smaller building. By 1978 the present building had assumed its present size.

- 25 - **Barn.** Constructed ca. 1975. Wood frame. 40' x 79'. Metal siding.

- 27 - **Horse Barn.** Constructed 1907. Wood frame. 180' x 50'. North, east and west walls covered with plywood siding; south wall is covered with drop siding.

This 44 stall barn was originally located at the southwest corner of the original 25 acre fairground plot, where it was also oriented in an east-west direction. It was moved to its present location in 1935. The barn's original monitor roof has been removed and replaced with a new metal roof containing fiber glass skylights.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Exploration/Settlement

Entertainment/Recreation

Significant Person

NA

Period of Significance

1907-1942

Significant Dates

NA

Cultural Affiliation

NA

Architect/Builder

Unknown

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Wells County Fairgrounds is a significant North Dakota resource under Criterion A for two reasons. First, it is a building complex which developed out of, and which continues to illustrate, the "boomerism" that was so characteristic of North Dakota's settlement history. Second, it remains perhaps the most intact North Dakota example of an institution, i.e., the county fair, which until the post World War II years was a major source of recreation and entertainment in this most rural of states. The fairgrounds served the community in a variety of ways far beyond that single week each year during which the fair was held. Picnics, dances, conventions, political rallies, county "play days", band concerts, baseball games, and high school track meets were among the activities pursued at the fairgrounds during the remainder of the year. The importance of the fair and the fairgrounds to the community in which it was located, Fessenden, can be judged by the fact that at least as late as 1965 it called itself "the Fair City" and its official local governmental stationary bore a logo showing horses racing past the fairgrounds grandstand. To say that "fair week" in Fessenden was the community's largest annual social event would be an understatement. As a distinguishable entity whose components generally lack individual distinction, the Wells County Fairgrounds in every aspect of integrity is a significant entity and is eligible under Criterion C.

The Wells County Fairgrounds District is a significant representation within Wells County, North Dakota, of a phenomenon which extended well beyond the county's borders - or the State's, for that matter. That phenomenon was the establishment of agricultural associations by groups of private individuals, generally locally prominent businessmen, interested in "booming" their areas. These organizations went by a variety of names: "agricultural society," "agricultural association," "agricultural and industrial society," "agricultural fair." Not infrequently terms such as "driving park association," "fair and racing society," "agricultural and sporting association," "fair and trotting association," etc., were used. Such terms provide a none too subtle clue to one of the primary recreational aspects of these associations: horse racing.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA
 preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
 previously listed in the National Register
 previously determined eligible by the National Register
 designated a National Historic Landmark
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:
 State historic preservation office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University
 Other
Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of property 35 acres

UTM References

A

1	4	4	5	2	7	8	0	5	2	7	6	9	3	0
Zone	Easting		Northing											

C

1	4	4	5	3	4	5	0	5	2	7	6	4	4	0
Zone	Easting		Northing											

B

1	4	4	5	3	5	5	0	5	2	7	6	9	3	0
Zone	Easting		Northing											

D

1	4	4	5	2	7	8	0	5	2	7	6	4	4	0
Zone	Easting		Northing											

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description From the northwest corner of Section 17, Township 148, Range 70 West, thence South along the west boundary line 1827' 8.4", thence East 858', thence North 1827' 8.4", thence West 858' to the point of beginning.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The Wells County Fairgrounds period of significance is 1907-1942. The fairgrounds achieved its present extent in 1942, the end date for the property's period of significance.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Louis N. Hafermehl, Director Division of Archeology & Historic Preservation
organization State Historical Society of North Dakota date December 31, 1990
street & number ND Heritage Center, 612 E. Blvd. Ave telephone (701)224-2672
city or town Bismarck state ND zip code 58505

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By the mid-1800's horse racing was a feature of agricultural fairs throughout the country, and was only one of many kinds of fair entertainment that critics of the day noted were less than uplifting. The pseudonymous correspondent, "John Plowhandle," observed in Moore's Rural New-Yorker, for example, that the fictitious "'Toemuddy and Pumpkin Hill Grub and Blow Society' intended to offer a \$2 premium for the best shorthorn bull, \$10 for 'the three best squaws that would ride round the ring bare-backed,' and \$25 for the 'five Indians that went round the ring quickest on one leg, no staff or pole allowed, and they to be dressed in full costume and sing war songs all the way.'"¹

An examination of the North Dakota Secretary of State's Multi-volume Domestic Corporation Index yields a list of 140 such organizations which incorporated from 1889 through 1912. Many of these associations may have never sponsored a fair, much less purchased land and constructed buildings for the purpose. Among those who did, however, was the Wells County Fair Association. Though not the earliest such association, it founded a fair which, except for a few years during World Wars I and II and the heart of the Great Depression, has operated annually since 1907. In its physical manifestation (i.e., the fairgrounds and associated buildings and structures), the Wells County Fair is probably North Dakota's most evocative example of the property type.

The Wells County Fair Association was incorporated in 1906 and capitalized at \$10,000, with one hundred shares selling at \$100 each. The stated purpose of the corporation was "to encourage the association, manufacturing, and stock raising industries, and to promote the general prosperity, progress, and development of Wells County, North Dakota; to purchase, hold or lease real estate for the purpose of erecting buildings and making other improvements to promote and encourage agriculture, horticulture, mechanics, manufactures, stock raising and general domestic industry."²

Heading the list of corporation directors was James K. Swan. Swan had been an incorporator of the Grand Forks Agricultural Society when it was organized in 1885. Likely he was the driving force behind the establishment of the Wells County Fair Association, for not only did his name head the list of its incorporators, its Articles

1 (Donald B. Marti, Historical Directory of American Agricultural Fairs, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1986, p. 12. Quoting Moore's Rural New-Yorker 11 (25 February 1860):61.

2 North Dakota Secretary of State. Articles of Incorporation, Wells County Fair Association.

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of Incorporation were taken practically word-for-word from those of the Grand Forks Agricultural Society of which Swan had also been a founding member.

Within six months of its organization, the Wells County Fair Association had purchased a twenty-five acre plot of ground at the south edge of Fessenden, the county seat, and not coincidentally the home of at least ten of the association's eleven directors. Scarcely more than three months later the first Wells County Fair was held. One of its primary attractions was boldly announced on page one of the March 1, 1907 issue of the Wells County Free Press - "Fessenden Will have Races at County Fair." The races were enticed to Fessenden through the efforts of John Conner, one of the directors of the Wells County Fair Association, who encouraged the members of the Central Racing circuit to include the fairgrounds track as one of its racing sites. Thus Fessenden became one of the circuit's nine racing sites for 1907. Horse racing has been an important element of the Fair ever since. Securing the races, said the Free Press, "Should encourage local horseman [sic] and stimulate the breeding of trotting stock. It will give our prosperous farmers a chance to spend a little surplus money in a way that will yield them pleasure as well as profit."³

The Association's energy in the weeks before the first Wells County Fair was directed toward making the capital improvement expenditures necessary to assure the greatest return on their investment. In addition to the race track and accompanying grandstand a large barn (180' x 48'), which "provid[ed] room for 40 stalls, 9 x 14 each, with 20 foot center driveway for carts, etc." was "built on the high ground to the southwestern part of the grounds."⁴ One additional barn, as well as "stable accommodations for stock exhibits" were also built that first year. Of these, the racetrack, grandstand, and large barn remain. The grandstand sits slightly north of its original location (now the location of the larger, 1926, grandstand) and has been slightly modified with a shed-roofed, 1-story, addition (ca. 1975) along its rear wall. The barn, too, has been moved from its original location to the southeast corner of the fairgrounds. This move probably occurred in 1935.

The Association's desire for a return on their investment is certainly understandable; failure to achieve a return would have meant an end to the enterprise and, with it, the potential extant in the "County Fair" ideal to "boom" Wells County and its county seat, Fessenden. The Association's staunch supporter, the Wells County Free Press, in the weeks leading up to the first Fair, repeatedly reflected the

3 Wells County Free Press, 3/10/07, p. 1. Hereafter noted as WCFP.

4 WCFP, 6/21/07, P. 1.

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"boomer" mentality that existed among the Association's directors. On April 5, 1907, for example, the Free Press noted it was "looking forward to a fair that will be a credit to our county, an inspiration to our citizens to progress and an inducement to other up-to-date people to locate in our banner county."⁵ On June 14 the Free Press urged that the county's citizens use the opportunity represented by the fair to "make our county an attractive one to live in and show that it is a profitable one to invest in."⁶ Page one readers of the Free Press on July 26 were treated to a brief discourse touting the value of the fair. "A fair promotes industry, fosters enterprise and generates competition. It gives fresh incentives to the farmer and stock raiser, and encourages agriculture, while to the ladies it affords a friendly rivalry in the various departments of home work," blared the Free Press. The fair "is conducted especially to show the agricultural products of the county and thus, indirectly, benefit the county and the land owner, by showing to the world that This county is a desirable place to own land and to make a home," boomed the Free Press three days before the fair began.

Judging from the accounts printed in the Free Press after the event the fair appears to have been a great success. Indeed it must have been, for the Association proceeded with a major new capital improvement at the fairgrounds - construction of "a large exhibit building . . . [to] accommodate the women's school exhibits and farm produce and agricultural exhibits."⁷ The building stands today on its original location appearing much as it must have when described as being "in the shape of a cross, 24 foot square in the center and four 24 foot square wings."⁸

During the Great War, in 1919 and 1920, the fair was discontinued. The years 1920-23, however, were a watershed for the Wells County Fair. Under North Dakota's restrictive constitution, local governmental subdivisions' only powers were those expressly delegated by the legislature. Prior to 1919 no legislation existed to allow county governments to establish their own fairs -- a raison d'etre for the organization in 1907 of the Wells County Fair Association.

The state legislature, during the 1919 session, passed a law authorizing county commissioners to submit to the voters the proposition of leasing or purchasing up to eighty acres of land for county fair purposes and to levy special taxes to raise funds

5 WCFP, 4/5/07, p. 1
6 WCFP, 6/14/07, p. 1
7 WCFP, 7/3/08, p. 1.
8 Ibid.

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for such purposes, as well as to operate and manage county fairs. The law required that a county government, when petitioned by five percent of the legal voters in at least one-half of the precincts of the county, place the issue on the ballot. In Wells County the required petitions were submitted, and the county commissioners actively promoted a "Yes" vote. A full quarter page of the Wells County Free Press, on October 28, 1920, was devoted to a political advertisement which included the following signed statement from the commissioners:

In the first place we all believe that Wells County should have some kind of a county fair every year. A county fair, not only promotes interest in agricultural and livestock industries, but it is a fine advertisement for the county.

And in the second place, we believe that such a fair can be better conducted by the county than by private associations.

And if the proposition gets the majority of the votes, we have decided to try it out before we buy any fair grounds. We will rent for a while. Then if the experiment succeeds, we can buy later. The officers of the old Wells County Fair Association have offered to rent the fairgrounds at Fessenden for a very small and nominal rent. If the majority of the voters want a fair, we will rent the fair grounds at Fessenden for a couple of years. At the end of a few fairs, we can all better tell whether it is best to buy land and more buildings. But we will not buy until we are sure that such a County Fair will be a success.

If You Want To Try it Out Along These Lines, Then Be Sure And Vote "Yes" On The Proposition.

The proposition was soundly supported at the polls in November of 1920, those in favor garnering sixty percent of the vote.⁹ A month later the County Commissioners carried out their promise to lease the fairgrounds from the association by entering into a three year lease agreement which committed the county to an annual lease payment of \$500 in addition to maintaining the fairground buildings and the insurance on them.¹⁰

⁹ Wells County Free Press, Nov. 11, 1920, p. 1.

¹⁰ Fessenden Diamond Jubilee, p. 26.

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In October, 1923, the Wells County Commissioners decided to purchase, for \$9,000 payable in fifteen equal installments of \$600 per year, the fairgrounds which had been established by the association sixteen years previously. The association charged no interest on the deferred payments.¹¹

Even while leasing the property the county made improvements. In the early summer of 1921, for example, prior to the first county-sponsored fair, they constructed "a string of new sheds . . . which . . . will care for the cattle." "New hog and sheep sheds have also been built," the Free Press reported." Also that year "a good number of fine exhibition coops" were installed for the benefit of poultry breeders.¹² These were probably all among those structures shown running along the western boundary of the fairgrounds in a north-south line which can be seen on the May 1929 Sanborn map of Fessenden.

The importance of the county fair as perceived by successive county commissions, is evidenced by their willingness to improve and expand the fairgrounds facility and their desire to put the fair on a sound managerial footing. Upon leasing the fairgrounds in 1920 they also hired a Secretary-Manager, A.F. Belcher. Professional fair management had largely developed after the organization of the International Association of Fairs and Expositions in 1891. It published and distributed to its members management studies on topics such as advertising, budgeting and other business practices necessary for effective and efficient fair management. By 1924 the recognized importance of providing such managerial skills resulted in a School of Fair Management jointly conducted by the association and the University of Chicago.¹³ That professional fair managers existed within the North Dakota fair circuit can be surmised from the fact that Belcher, even before the first Wells County Fair under his management was held, was elected vice-president of the North Dakota Association of County Fairs, "by managers of other associations."¹⁴ Unanswered is the question of whether Belcher's appointment reflected any particular esteem with which the Wells County Fair may have been held in other parts of the state.

If physical improvement and growth are used as a gauge, clearly the county's purchase of the fairgrounds and assumption of fair management was a success. In 1926 a

11 WCFP, 10/11/23, p. 1.

12 WCFP, 7/14/21, p. 1.

13 Donald B. Marti, Historical Directory of American Agricultural Fairs, (New York, 1986), p. 20.

14 WCFP, 5/2/29, p. 1.

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new grandstand was added to the fairgrounds, more than doubling the seating capacity for the horse races and other events taking place in front of the grandstand. Entertainment was always an important part of the Wells County Fair, as it historically has been for most agricultural fairs in this country. Entertainments in front of the grandstand included activities as diverse as livestock parades, acrobatic troupes, humorists, fireworks displays, and public weddings. The latter deserves special mention. Before the fair, newspapers publicized the intent to cap off an evening's entertainment by conducting a public wedding in front of the grandstand. Interested couples were invited to submit their names for a drawing. The chosen lucky couple, whose identity was closely guarded prior to the event, then entered the holy bonds of matrimony in front of several thousand strangers - and presumably several extremely surprised friends and family members - in what can perhaps best be described as a public elopement. (Note: Public weddings were apparently not unique to the midwest or to county fairs. North Dakota State Historic Preservation Office staff Architect, Robert A. Mitchell, recalls an aunt and uncle who were publicly married during the intermission at a theater in Philadelphia, PA, in the late 1930's.)

The year 1929 brought two major new additions to the complex. A Boys and Girls Club building was constructed to "house the 4-H Club and agricultural exhibits . . . and . . . provide dining and sleeping quarters in the second story for the Junior Club members who hold their annual convention during the fair." Also constructed that year was a new barn to "accommodate 30 head of racing stock, relieving in a measure the crowded conditions in the present barn and temporary stables."¹⁵ The former building still stands on its original site at the northwest corner of the fairgrounds, just inside the main gate. The latter, which was located on the southwest corner of the grounds, may have been moved and perhaps exists today as building # 22.

Two separate purchases by the county in 1934 and 1942, each of five acres of land to the south of the original 25 acre fairground tract, established the fairgrounds' existing boundaries. Two additional reasons account for the complex's present appearance: Depression-era federal aid programs, and the assumption of the fair's management by Edward W. Vancura, Wells County agent.

Vancura was appointed to succeed Belcher in early 1931. The Free Press touted Vancura's appointment as an economy measure. And indeed it was, for he agreed to accept the position at no additional salary. This was clearly important to the continuance of the fair, for North Dakota, along with the rest of the nation, was in

15 WCFP, 5/2/29. p. 1.

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the midst of the Great Depression. "Much of the time of his office has necessarily been devoted to the fair, especially in the farm exhibit departments and it is expected that the two tasks can be combined very successfully," the Free Press explained.¹⁶ Vancura's willingness to accept the position at no salary increase certainly encouraged the Commissioners to continue of the fair during those very lean times. Through most of January, 1931 the commission debated whether to continue the fair, finally voting, albeit not unanimously (4-1), in favor of continuance.¹⁷

Economic hard times, however, assured that attacks on the fair would also continue. Vancura did his best to combat such moves. In 1932 the County Taxpayers Association opposed continuance of the fair for that year. Again the Commissioners supported the fair - though with a diminishing majority (3-2). Quite possibly Vancura's proposal to the Commissioners at the same meeting to have a free gate to the fair staved off defeat. The "free-gate plan" as it was called eliminated the standard admission charge to enter the fairgrounds but increased charges for concessions and grandstand entry. The theory, of course, was that loss of gate income would be more than made up for by increased concessions and grandstand income.¹⁸ The free gate has characterized the Wells County Fair ever since.

1933 again brought attempts to discontinue the fair. In April Commissioners were submitted petitions from both proponents (737 signatures) and opponents (285 signatures) of the fair. Notwithstanding the overwhelming support in favor of the fair, a motion for its discontinuance was introduced. It died, however, for lack of a second.¹⁹

1934 brought a one year hiatus in fair operation. One can little imagine how things could have looked worse in North Dakota in June of 1934 or that a more comprehensive litany of reasons for not holding the fair could have been stated than those contained in the Commissioner's resolution not to hold the fair. The outlook for a grain crop in Wells County was very poor; livestock herds usually exhibited at the fair were in rather poor condition; due to drought there would be no agricultural products ready for display and exhibit; tax payments weren't being made; the county treasury was depleted; large cash receipts weren't anticipated. The resolution passed unanimously.²⁰

16 WCFP, 1/15/31, p. 1.

17 WCFP, 1/22/31, p. 3.

18 WCFP, 1/14/32, p. 1.

19 Wells County Commissioner's Proceedings, 4/6/33, Book 4, p. 174.

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Though no fair was held in '34, the fairgrounds did not go unused. Fifty-one enlisted men and two officers of the Civilian Conservation Corps arrived in Fessenden in mid-August and set up quarters in the 4-H Club building at the fairgrounds. Engaged in construction of two dams on the James River north and east of Fessenden, the camp remained at the fairgrounds until mid-October.²¹ Furthermore, the County Commissioners that year expanded the fairgrounds through purchase, at \$5.00 an acre, of five acres to the immediate south of the original 25 acre tract. This, coupled with federal relief programs, set the stage for the next phase of fairgrounds development.

The Free Press, editorializing in late May, 1935, tied the two, i.e., relief programs and fairgrounds, together as follows: "The many projects (FERA) completed and the many ones being considered also speak well for the local office. Under efficient leadership much can be done and any doubter should[sic] take a peek at the difference in the Wells County Fairgrounds."²² Among the improvements were construction of a large barn, 80' x 80', in the southwest corner of the expanded fairgrounds, the octagonal Old Settlers Building and nearby drinking fountain, all of which are extant.²³ All of the old sheds which lined the western boundary of the fairgrounds were torn down and "some of the buildings"²⁴ moved to the south end of the fairgrounds. At least one of these moved buildings was the original race horse barn (180' x 48').

The most impressive architectural contribution of federal relief programs to the fairgrounds, however, was Festival Hall, a large (44'x120') building constructed of cut granite fieldstone with an arched roof. Purportedly designed by the Fair Manager, E.W. Vancura, the building was constructed by WPA workers and the federal government also furnished lumber, cement, windows, and maple flooring for the building. The Free Press described Festival Hall as a building which would be "strikingly pretty" and one which would "provide the largest seating capacity in Fessenden for indoor gatherings and [filling a long-felt need for gatherings of all sorts]."²⁵ They were right on both counts: As the only stone building at the Wells County Fairgrounds, and because of its size and the excellence of its masonry work, it is a dominant feature of the complex.

20 Wells County Commissioner's Proceedings, 6/9/34, Book 4, p. 254.

21 WCFP, 8/23/34, p. 1 & 10/11/34, p. 1.

22 WCFP, 5/30/35, p. 2. FERA referred to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, predecessor to the WPA.

23 WCFP, 6/27/35, p. 1 and Fessenden Diamond Jubilee, p. 27. Hereafter noted as FDJ.

24 FDJ, p. 27.

25 WCFP, 5/13/37, p. 8.

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During the fair the basement of Festival Hall housed industrial exhibits, one purpose for which it was specifically designed. The main floor was used for the evening dances which had been a feature of the fair almost since its inception. As the Free Press had predicted, however, Festival Hall's use extended far beyond fair week. Other dances, high school music festivals, conventions, political rallies, and roller skating are among the many activities which have been, and continue to be, conducted within the building. Festival Hall is one of forty-five WPA buildings in the state, and one of only two in Wells County, constructed as community buildings.

Festival Hall, at an estimated cost of \$15,000, consumed the lion's share of the WPA allocation for fairgrounds improvements in 1937. An additional \$11,000 in WPA funds was used to raise the racetrack and improve its drainage while other portions of the grounds were levelled. A dressing room was installed under the no longer extant bandstand.²⁶ 2,600 feet of six inch water mains were laid and four fire hydrants installed.

In 1943 another national crisis, World War II, resulted in the last closure of the fair. Gasoline rationing and wartime restrictions on food and other items made it difficult, if not impossible, for the county to hold the fair and for many people to attend. Reporting on the action not to hold the fair the Free Press assured its readers that the annual event would resume once the war was won.²⁷ They would not have to wait that long, however; the summer of 1944 brought a resumption of the fair and with it record crowds and receipts.²⁸ Since that time the Wells County Fair has been an annual summer event in central North Dakota.

26 WCFP, 7/8/37, p. 1.

27 WCFP, 4/ 22/43, P. 1.

28 WCFP, 7/20/44, p. 1.

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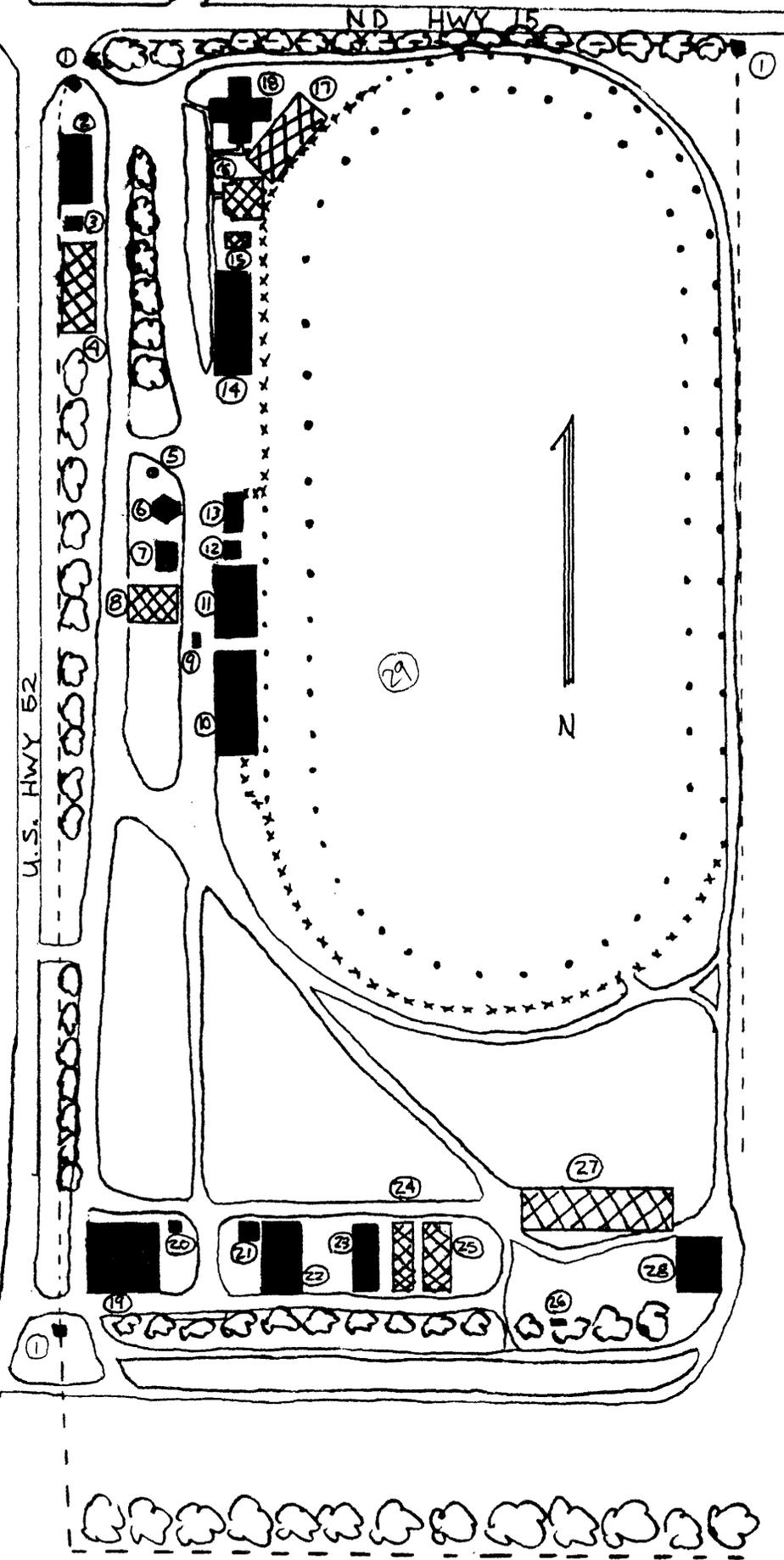
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- ① ENTRY GATE & CORNER POSTS
- ② 4-H BUILDING
- ③ CARETAKER'S RESIDENCE
- ④ HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNEX #2
- ⑤ WELL
- ⑥ OLD SETTLER'S BUILDING
- ⑦ 4-H SNACK SHACK
- ⑧ CATHOLIC CHURCH STAND BUILDING
- ⑨ TICKET BOOTH
- ⑩ LARGE GRANDSTAND
- ⑪ SMALL GRANDSTAND
- ⑫ RESTROOMS
- ⑬ RACING COMMISSION BUILDING
- ⑭ FESTIVAL HALL
- ⑮ PONY GULCH SCHOOL
- ⑯ EMRICK SCHOOL
- ⑰ HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNEX #1
- ⑱ HOME ECONOMICS BUILDING
- ⑲ 4-H BARN
- ⑳ UNNAMED BUILDING
- ㉑ RESTROOMS
- ㉒ HORSE BARN
- ㉓ BARN
- ㉔ BARN
- ㉕ BARN
- ㉖ OUTHOUSE
- ㉗ HORSE BARN
- ㉘ BARN
- ㉙ TRACK

- WIRE FENCE, 5 FT. HIGH
- xxxxxx BUTTED BOARD PICKET FENCE
- PIPE TRACK RAILS
- CONTRIBUTING
- ▣ NON-CONTRIBUTING



WELLS COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS
FESSENDEN, NORTH DAKOTA

SCALE (1" = 200')

200 100 0 200