

Fun and function fill the county fairgrounds

From County Fair to private events, fairgrounds fit the bill

Submitted by the
Ozaukee County Tourism
Council

This month marks the 162nd anniversary of the Ozaukee County Fair, a five-day event that annually brings families from all over the county and southeastern Wisconsin to enjoy live music, fair food, exhibits, competitions, midway rides and more. With no general entry fee, the Ozaukee County Fair (July 28-August 1 this year) offers families affordable access to a full schedule of traditional fair offerings. Ticketed grandstand events include truck and tractor pulls, demolition derbies and occasional special events.

The history of the fair and fairgrounds is as fun and varied as the fair itself. In January of 1859, about 20 years after the first European immigrants settled in Ozaukee County, a group of residents gathered to plan a small festival, as farmers and landowners sought the opportunity to exhibit their goods and engage in friendly competition with their peers. They formed the Ozaukee County Agricultural Society (the organization that still runs the fair today) with the intention of "promoting and improving the agriculture, horticulture, mechanic and household arts" in the county. The first Ozaukee County Fair was held on October 11, 1859, and featured exhibits, food and steam-driven midway rides. Expenses were around \$180, and entrance fees brought in \$41.45.

For the first 30 years, the fair was held on leased land in other areas of the county. It was moved permanently to the current location in 1890, when Cedarburg agreed to build a half-mile horse race-track on land controlled by the OCAS. The organization struggled during the Great Depression, and sold the land to the Cedarburg Fire Department. The CFD still owns the south end of the grounds, hence the name "Firemen's Park." The northern portion was added in the late 1960s in a combined purchase by the

OCAS and the county, when it was realized that more room was needed for the growing fair. Six acres were donated by the OCAS, and an additional 19 acres were purchased by the county from a local farmer; in fact, one of the buildings still used today was the family's chicken barn.

The Ozaukee County 4-H clubs started forming in 1929, and their tireless fundraising efforts resulted in many of the permanent structures and additions on the property, including the horse stalls and ring, the riding arena, the milking parlor, sewer lines and a number of other buildings.

The fair enjoyed fun and historically significant highlights over the years, including exhibiting machinery for the first time (1883); exhibiting the phonograph, described as a "wonderful piece of human ingenuity" (1890); auto races that achieved speeds of 60 mph (1915); construction of a new grandstand (1923); the transition to a "free fair" with no admission charge (1942); and grandstand shows including hog catching and minstrel shows (1951), husband/wife calling and chicken plucking (1953) and ladies mud wrestling (1983).

The most recent structural changes to the grounds happened in 2012, and included the addition of the Ascension Columbia St. Mary's Expo Center, which is available to the public from April to September (with the exception of the Ozaukee County Fair dates) and home to the Milwaukee Curling Club from October through March.

The Curling Club uses the facility daily during the season, and welcomes teams from around the state and as far away as Canada for tournaments (which can host as many as 150 curlers). The club opens the facility to the general public on occasion, for curling lessons and some of their tournaments (called "bonspiel").

At the close of the curling season, the building transforms into an amazing

rentable event space — 27,000 square feet that can accommodate up to 1,000 people for a single event; or can be divided into a comfortable bar/lounge area that accommodates 120, or a meeting room that comfortably seats 80 guests. The versatile space can be casual or elegant depending upon décor.

Also built in 2012 was the Ozaukee Pavilion, a 6,000-square-foot addition to an existing 4-H building that seats up to 275 in the South Pavilion and 100 in the North Pavilion. Kitchen facilities divide two rooms that can also be utilized as one large space. The Pavilion is buzzing with activity during the Ozaukee County Fair, but is available for rent year-round. In addition to serving as a space for wedding receptions, private parties and other events, many local clubs, government agencies and organizations use the building for meetings throughout the year.

Also available for rent is the picnic gazebo, perfect for outdoor wedding receptions, reunions and parties, and the equestrian facilities, which are available for horse shows and can be expanded to nearby barns to accommodate up to 135 stalls.

Rentals were at an all-time high in 2018 and 2019 with wedding receptions, anniversary and graduation parties, bridal and baby showers, trade shows and expos, corporate meetings and horse shows. A local soccer club leased the show arena for winter soccer practice. The Ozaukee Pavilion and nearby grounds most recently served as a spot for blood drives and COVID vaccine clinics during the pandemic, and still offers COVID testing in the south parking lot.

For more information about rentals, contact Mary Sheffield at mrsheffield@co.ozaukee.wi.us.

As for Firemen's Park, the space is used for training (for example, working with car fires, extrication skills, and laying hose in a controlled environment), but it serves primarily as a fundraising source for the Cedarburg Fire Department. Firemen's Park is a nonprofit agency run by the organization Cedarburg Firemen's Park Inc., which rents out the area to the



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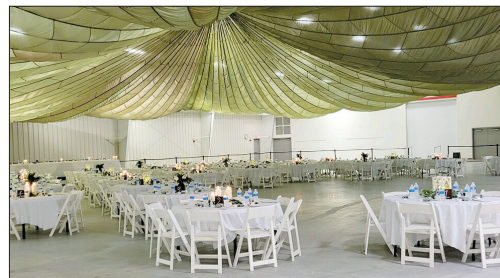
A 1980s aerial view of the Ozaukee County Fairgrounds, a community gathering place since 1890.

OCAS during the fair (retaining the right to run Firemen's Bar underneath the grandstands) and rents spaces for Maxwell Street Days, where vendors sell acres of antiques, crafts, vintage treasures, collectibles and more.

Maxwell Street Days takes over the grounds four Sundays throughout the summer — it is a favorite among local residents, many of whom are excited that the event is scheduled to be back on September 5 and October 3 after a number of events were canceled because of the pandemic. Anyone enjoying food and beverages at Maxwell Street Days is contributing to Cedarburg Firemen's Park Inc.

"Most people don't realize that city tax dollars don't pay for Cedarburg's firefighting equipment," says Chief Jeff Vahsholtz. "All our equipment, including vehicles, is purchased with the funds raised by Firemen's Park." In addition, Cedarburg Firemen's Park Inc. has donated considerable amounts to organizations around the city, including the public library, Boy Scout Park, the high school and the American Legion.

Firemen's Park is also rentable for private events, as is the area under the grandstands, including Firemen's Bar. In fact, the organization can even provide licensed bartenders for events, many



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When the County Fair isn't in session, the Ascension Columbia St. Mary's Expo Center is used for other events, such as the winter home of the Milwaukee Curling Club, and public functions during summer months, such as this recent wedding.

of whom are volunteer firefighters and EMTs. Contact the fire station for more information.

"The grounds are a delightful part of Ozaukee County," says Ozaukee County Board Supervisor Kathy Geracie. "Of course residents flock to the Ozaukee County Fair and Maxwell Street Days. But more and more are realizing what a gem we have here when it comes time to plan a special event, be it a wedding, a corporate function, a reunion or even a horse show. Where else do you have such a large versatile piece of land, with beautiful structures to accommodate any need, accessible to so many hotels and so close to a quaint little town like Cedarburg?"

For more information on the Ozaukee County Fair-



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The fairgrounds is also home of the popular Maxwell Street Days.

grounds, visit www.co.ozaukee.wi.us. For more information on lodging, shops, restaurants and attractions, pick up a copy of the Ozaukee County Tourism Guide available at area chambers and visitor's centers, visit www.ozaukee-tourism.com and follow the Ozaukee County Tourism Facebook page. Thank you for being a tourist in your own county!