Bloomington’s west side first site for county fairgrounds
By Bill Kemp

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This section from the 1874 McLean County plat book shows the location of the old west-side fair grounds.

The McLean County 4-H Fair opens this Wednesday, August 1, marking the sixteenth year the annual event had been staged at the “new” west side grounds. We say “new” because the county’s first permanent fairground was also on Bloomington’s west side.

For three decades, from the mid-1850s to the mid-1880s, the county fair was held about one-half mile west of the Chicago & Alton Railroad mainline (now Amtrak and Union Pacific), and between Market and Washington streets. Confused? Today, the Secretary of State’s DMV office is located on what was once the north end of the fairgrounds.

Organized in March 1852, the McLean County Agricultural Society held its first fair later that fall. According to a society report, the inaugural event attracted 118 entries of various livestock, with premiums amounting to a then not-insignificant $146.

The location of the first two or three fairs is not known. That changes in 1854 when an association, apart from, though working with the agricultural society, acquired the west side parcel for a permanent fairground. “They have ten acres of land, well watered and shaded, which cost with the fencing and other improvements the sum of $1,800,” reported the McLean County Agricultural Society (the fairground would eventually come to encompass 55 acres or more). Back then, a branch of Sugar Creek ran east-west through the property, which likely proved handy when watering stock during muggy fair days. Befitting a permanent fairground, there would eventually be substantial structures
on the premises, one of the larger being a circular amphitheater located inside the half-mile dirt race track.

By 1855, the local county fair was well on its way to becoming a fall tradition. On the fair’s third day that late September, entries included “fruits, flowers and mechanical and agricultural implements, as well as a fine display of needlework,” reported The Pantagraph. “Amongst the contributions to the floral department, we noticed a beautiful collection of dahlias by our enterprising nurseryman, F.K. Phoenix, embracing over forty varieties, besides many other flowers.”

Apart from the fair, the fairgrounds also hosted a wide range of events over the years, none more common than horse racing. In late May 1875, Dr. Edmond Stevens’ “Tom Crowder” bested Robert McCart’s new mare “Cotton-Picker” in two half-mile heats. “The attendance was quite large,” reported The Pantagraph, adding that the crowd “contained representatives of nearly every occupation—the ministry perhaps excluded.” A little more than a month later, on July 5, Irish Catholics from Bloomington and various downstate communities gathered at the fairgrounds for a day of picnicking, dancing and “other social amusements.”

The final fair at the old west side grounds was held September 9-12 1884, ending a run of at least 29 consecutive years at the same location. In the end, it appears the fair could not survive the persistent money problems of the fairground association and its stockholders.

For a while, the old site was still used, though not always for first-class entertainment. In May 1885, for example, a seedy wild west show paraded through town before performing at the now-forlorn fairgrounds. The crowd for Fargo’s Wild West show “was a small one, yet much bigger than the performance deserved,” noted The Bulletin, a long-defunct daily competitor to The Pantagraph. “The parade of the dirty, greasy individuals, and the skinny, lifeless shabbily caparisoned (dressed) alleged horses through the streets this morning was a very bad advertisement for the concern. The managers would do better to hide their ‘attractions’ until they got an audience through the gates of their show grounds.”

The same day The Bulletin savaged Fargo’s it reported the sale of the west side grounds to Maria Paist for $12,300 (or about $300,000 today, adjusted for inflation). The sale cleared up the long-standing indebtedness of the fairgrounds, and Paist moved to develop the parcel into a residential development. The Fair Ground subdivision (as it was called) was platted in July 1887, with the aptly named Circle Drive looping through the heart of the new development (though this street did not correspond to the old fairground dirt track).

Bordered by Market (on the north), Stillwell (east), Washington (south) and Caroline streets (the latter originally called County Rd.), the development never fulfilled its promise. Most of the lots remained empty, and the street layout was eventually altered and much of the subdivision converted to commercial use. Today, one would never guess
this tough stretch of Bloomington once served as the original McLean County Fairgrounds.

-30-