

Parish fairs, Harvest Festival highlight agricultural, arts, athletic traditions

By Brian J. Costello

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A succession of autumn festivals and fairs, staged under different names and sponsorships in New Roads and surrounding communities through more than a century, have paid homage to the agricultural fecundity of Pointe Coupee Parish

The original format of a local autumn festival was orchestrated by citizens from throughout the parish and known as the Pointe Coupee Parish Fair. The first fair was staged Thursday through Saturday, October 29-31, 1914 on the grounds of Poydras Academy in downtown New Roads. Officially opening with a parade of decorated automobiles, the fair was typical of festivals of its time, featuring and promoting the region's agricultural resources and domestic crafts.

Thousands attended the event, which included showings of cattle, horses, mules, swine and poultry; exhibits of canned produce and sewing; competitive tennis matches; a students' spelling bee; and addresses by local, state, railroad and immigration officials. Prizes were awarded to top exhibit entries.

The second fair, held in 1915, was extended to four days and attracted larger crowds, with more than 5,000 visiting on Sunday alone. The 1916 fair featured increased participation by local school students. In 1917, the three-day event included a carnival show and dance music by the noted Bud Scott orchestra of Natchez, Mississippi. Plans were nearly complete for the 1918 fair when the influenza pandemic forced its cancellation on October 12.

Twelve years elapsed before the Pointe Coupee Parish Fair was revived, in 1930. It was staged at Innis, Louisiana for that year only, and the resumption was marked by the renumbering of the annual event from Number One. The Pointe Coupée Parish Police Jury, per its Minutes of September 1, 1930, voted 9-2 in favor of allocating \$100, out of the fund for the salary of its Secretary, to "the upper Pointe Coupée Fair."

The second annual Pointe Coupée Parish Fair, held in 1931, and all of its successors through 1964, were staged in New Roads' Community Park, which had opened in 1927.

The fair was coordinated by Pointe Coupée Parish Fair Association, a corporate entity, governed by an elected president and board. Early orchestrators included County Agent A.B. Curet as Adviser, False River gardener J. Wade LeBeau, Dr. Lewis Perkins, and Miss Aline Hebert.

Fair Managers through the years included: J. Wade LeBeau, from 1934 through 1951; County Agent Sterling Deville in 1954, 1955, 1961; Valverde agricultural leader Lee Chase in 1957-1958; A. Arthur Bondy, Jr. in 1960 and 1962; and J.B. Olinde, Jr. in 1963 and 1964. Bondy was to manage in 1961, but was called to active National Guard duty, and Deville served in his stead.

LeBeau, who ordinarily took the top winning exhibit entries to Donaldsonville for display in the South Louisiana State Fair, died just before the Pointe Coupée fair of 1961.

The Parish Fairs of 1931-1954 were three-day events (Friday, Saturday and Sunday), with the exception of 1957, when Thursday was added, for a four-day fair. October was the usual month for the fair, with the exceptions of 1934 and 1938-1941 when it was held in September.

Each year brought growth in scope, participation and attendance. Parish residents, adults and youth, entered as many as 1,000 or more exhibits for competition for prizes, these entries including cattle,

horses, swine, poultry, rabbits, food preparation and conservation, textiles, floral arrangements and artworks.

A Better Babies' contest, athletic matches between area schools, speeches by political candidates, and a nighttime dance were annual features, as was the Harry Burke Shows midway rides, exhibits by the Pointe Coupée Parish Health Unit and Library, and concession stands operated as fundraisers by and increasing number of local organizations, schools and churches.

In those years of legalized segregation, the standard program began with School Day on Friday, with all white public schools of the parish sending their students to participate in demonstrations, competitions and athletic matches. Saturday was reserved to attendance by African-America students and fair-goers, and Sunday, the grand finale, for whites.

Owing to material shortages and in deference to the war effort, no fairs were held during the World War II years of 1942-1945. The fair resumed in 1946, and included a new event: awarding of the oldest married couple on hand. The winners were Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Humphreys of Innis, who had been married for more than 60 years and had a combined age of 165.

The 16th annual Pointe Coupee Parish Fair in 1949 featured expanded participation, owing to the new National Guard Home site adjacent to the traditional fairgrounds, and beginning in 1955 in the successor National Guard Armory, which provided for the concentration of non-animal exhibits indoors. For a single year, 1961, when the local Guardsmen were called out for active duty, the unit's Gun Shed served as the exhibit space.

Beginning in 1950, the culminating Sunday afternoon of the Parish Fair was marked at 1 p.m. by the popular Horse Parade and Show featuring equestrian entries from Pointe Coupée and several other parishes across the state. More than 200 horses were featured in the inaugural parade.

In 1951, the event included the Pointe Coupée Parish Band, composed of musicians from all white high schools the parish, representatives of civic organizations and youth groups, festival queens, and the National Guard.

The route was from the fairground, down Community Park Drive (now Street) to East Main St., west on East Main to New Roads Street, north for several blocks, thence west on an unspecified cross street to Poydras Avenue, thence south on Poydras Avenue, First and St. Mary Streets to West Main, and thence east on Main back to the point of beginning.

Upon the parade's return to the fairground, the Horse Show was held, featuring barrel races, trick riding and other performances for an audience estimated at 1,200. A "Parade of Champions" premiered as highlight of the show in 1961. "Prof" Howard Alexander, Sr., a talented equestrian in his own right, was for many years a featured participant, Chairman and Master of Ceremonies for the show.

Grand Marshals of the Horse Parade through the years included District Ferd C. Claiborne, astride his white Arabian, in 1951, 1954, 1956-1959; Richard Glynn in 1953; State Representative J. Thomas Jewell in 1955, 1961 and 1963; District Judge G. Ross Kearney in 1960; veteran educator Morris Olinde in 1962 ; and Sheriff F.A. Smith in 1964.

Guest celebrities in the line of march in 1955 included New Roads native and New Orleans mayor deLesseps "Chep" Morrison and popular film, television, radio and recording star Rudy Vallee. In 1955 and 1959, the Pointe Coupée Banner stated the parade would follow its "usual" course, being along Community and Mill Streets to North Carolina Avenue, to East Fifth, to New Roads Street, to

Sixth Street, to Poydras Avenue and thence (via First Street) to and St. Mary Street, to Main Street, and through West and East Main back to Community Street, for a total of 1.5 miles covered. The Pointe Coupée Parish Fair of 1953 featured the largest number of participants in the livestock exhibit to date, including more than 100 head of cattle and 65 swine. Similarly, a record number of participants participated in the Horse Show and Parade.

In 1956, the fair was for a single time expanded to four days, with Thursday being Colored School Day and Saturday being Colored Adult Day. Friday was White School Day and Sunday the Grand Closing Day as in past years. More than 300 horses and riders were featured in the Horse Parade on Sunday afternoon.

The Pointe Coupée Parish Fair received an \$11,000 allocation from the Louisiana Legislature, owing to bills of local Representative J. Thomas Jewell successfully passing in 1952 and 1954. In its 25th year, 1958, the fair did not receive this funding owing to a veto by Governor Earl Long. The events went on as scheduled, however, and attracted record crowds.

Beginning in 1958, a Queen and Maids of the Horse Parade and Show were named from the top sellers of the nominal admission tickets to the show. The Queens rode in special vehicles in the parade, and lined up accordingly: Ginnie Hammett in 1958; Diane Glaser, 1959; Katie Glaser, 1960; Gay Keowen, 1961; Kathy Kissner, 1962; Faye Landry, 1963; and Dianne Canezaro, in 1964. In 1959, the attendance record was broken, when the Baton Rouge State Times pegged the cumulative three-day numbers at 20,000, some 1,500 of whom were on hand Sunday for the crowning of the Fair Queen after the Horse Show.

In 1961, the State-Times estimated more than 3,000 people to have attended the Friday opening of the fair, nearly 2,200 of whom were school children who were transported by buses for the traditional School Day activities.

The years of the Pointe Coupée Parish Fair coincided with Catholic abstinence from meat on Fridays, but the Archbishop of New Orleans in 1962 and Bishop of the new Diocese of Baton Rouge in 1963 and 1964 granted dispensations for those eating on the fairgrounds on Fridays.

The 1964 Pointe Coupée Parish Fair, Parade and Horse Show were held the weekend following Hurricane Hilda, which produced 80 mph winds and heavy crop and considerable structural damage in the area.

The decision not to have succeeding events, after that, the 31st fair since 1930, and 15th horse parade since 1950, was made due to supposed conflict on the fairgrounds and increasing tension in the Civil Rights movement.

Based on local and Baton Rouge news accounts, none of the fairs from 1914 through 1964 were marred by inclement weather, an enviable record for any outdoor event. Normally, sunny and balmy weather greeted fairgoers.

LE FESTIVAL DE LA POINTE COUPEE / POINTE COUPEE FAIR AND FESTIVAL

After an absence of 10 years, the autumn fair tradition was revived in New Roads in 1975 with the inaugural Festival de la Pointe Coupee, freely translated Pointe Coupee Fair and festival, staged by a new organization.

This event, was like its predecessor of 1931-1964, held in Community Park during 1975-1977. The 1975 festivities drew nearly 5,000 attendees, and in 1976 more than 6,000 turned out. Nineteen seventy-seven was marked by lower attendance due to rain.

In 1978, the growing Fair & Festival moved to the Woodmen of the World Camp 271 grounds on Colombo Lane, drawing a record crowd of more than 10,000. For several years, it flourished as a popular event for local as well as visiting fair-goers, featuring live music, midway rides, art contests, a red beans and rice cook-off, a runners' road race, the World Championship Monkey Wrench Throwing Contest and a Friday School Day of competitions.

In 1982, the Fair & Festival moved to False River Park and Scott Civic Center on Major Parkway, where it was held each autumn through 1985, and school participation on Fridays continued as in past years.

The final event, held in 1986, was staged in downtown New Roads on a Saturday and Sunday in October, and drew about 2,000 despite the uncertainty of the weather. Attendance peaked on Saturday morning for a parade of notables natives in open vehicles: author Ernest Gaines, retired Southern University Dean of Education Dr. Leroy Ellois, Jr, former State Representative and Speaker of the House J. Thomas Jewell, retired Legislative Auditor and Mayor J.B. Lancaster, and Louisiana National Guard Col. (subsequently Gen.) Levi Dabadie, Jr. Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop John Ricard, S.S.J., was also honored, but could not attend.

The parade likewise featured the premier turnout of the newly-formed Pointe Coupée Parish Mounted Sherriff's Posse, Fire Department entries, and the Rosenwald and Livonia High School Marching Bands. Beginning on Major Parkway, the procession moved east on False River Drive and Main Street to Alamo Street and disbanded off Gaudin Street – for a total of two miles -where the two school bands “battled” for spectators' applause. Antique car clubs from Baton Rouge were also slated, but did not show up, owing to the threatening weather.

An art show, the inaugural State Championship Speedboat Trials, and music were held later in the day, and a bass fishing tournament on Sunday, though rain on the latter day curtailed other events and thinned crowds.

POINTE COUPEE PARISH FAIR

Woodmen of the World Camp 271 assumed sponsorship of the parish's chief autumn event in 1987, and reverted to the former name of Pointe Coupee Parish Fair. It was staged in False River Park for the next several years, and included cookoff and athletic competitions, concession booths and the Mitchell Brothers midway rides.

Coinciding with the 1989 Parish Fair was the Pointe Coupée Harvest Celebration in downtown New Roads, with participation from 60 merchants and vendors, a farmers' market and craft bazaar. Matthew Grimmer was crowned Harvest King, while there were several Harvest Queens, in age categories from 12 months to 15 and up, accordingly: Jorie LeJeune, Danielle Palermo, Haley Thames, Amanda Jarreau, Miranda Bonaventure, Michelle Pierce, and Shawn Russo. The Pointe Coupée Parish Fair, under sponsorship of the Woodmen, was discontinued after a fairgoer injured an organizer attempting to halt an altercation in 1991.

HARVEST FESTIVAL ON FALSE RIVER

New Roads-Mayor Robert Myer, remembering the autumn fairs of his youth and envisioning a way of promoting the parish's agricultural importance, spurred the resurrection of the parish's fair and festival tradition in October 2011 as the Harvest Festival on False River. In its very first year, it eclipsed all previous parish fairs in size, scope and attendance.

Organized by the City of New Roads and underwritten with the aid of several civic-minded companies and organizations, the celebration set the standard for subsequent festivals with three-days of music of various genres, food court, more than 100 arts and crafts vendors, agricultural, contests, midway rides and a host of other activities.

Five thousand festival-goers defied damp and cold on Friday night, 10,000 attended on Saturday, and 10,000 on Sunday for a total attendance of 25,000 in the inaugural year.

In the following year, 2012, culminating fireworks were added to the programme.

Through 2016, the festival was a free event, but in 2017 imposed a \$5 admission fee for adults to help the City of New Roads recoup part of its increasing expenses associated with the annual event. Since its beginning, the Harvest Festival on False River has each year presented Queens in several age categories, ultimately from baby to adult, including: Rebecca Cortes, Kristen Ashford and Rachel Holmes, in 2011; Ashley McGowen, Callie Monceret and Dodie Mollere, 2012; Sophye Collins, Shelby Mougeot, Karlee Ledet, Ava Lorio, Anna Lagrone, Jenna LaCour, Catherine Bonaventure, Megan Miller and Mackenzie Mitchell, in 2013; Sophie Andre, Jordyn Dupre, Anna Bergeron, Katherine Jones, Anna Hendricks, Cierra Hendricks, Mariah Kador, Catherine Bonaventure and Taylor Judice, 2014; Londyn Wainwright, Saylor Olinde, Sophie Andre, Emma McNaughten, Catherine Marchand, Skylar Norred, Mariah Kador, Elise Doucet and Elizabeth Marchand, 2015; _____, 2016; Berkley Kitchens, Gemma Scallan, Ellie Dabadie, Morgen Beauvais, Ayden Achee, Marley Kador, Elise Doucet, Danielle Jones and Madeline Terradot, 2017; Codi Wright, Trista Manning, Ellie Dabadie, Rylie Hotard, Adelyn Kahao, Allie David, Presleigh Scott and Danielle Jones, 2018; __SEVEN HERE, Lexie LeBeau and Mason Burnette, 2019, __HERE__ 2022; and Nya Cox and Zoe Traoré, 2023.

Note: (____) above indicates no queens' identities located in Pointe Coupee Banner files.

The Harvest Festival's popularity throughout the region was manifested by the crowd growth, surpassed only by New Roads' Mardi Gras celebration. Officials' estimates of each years cumulative three-day Harvest Festival attendance has been as follows:

25,000 in 2011; between 40,000 and 50,000 in 2012; 50,000 to 60,000 in 2013; 60,000 in 2014 and 2015; and a record more than 60,000 despite sweltering heat in 2016, peaking on Saturday night with nearly 9,000 on Main Street and 7,000 on Morrison Parkway West on Saturday night.

The 2017 turnout was abbreviated to about 20,000 owing to a 15" rainfall and near 40 mph wind beginning at 4:20 p.m. on Saturday. The festival was closed when the storm struck, and the epic downpour overbanked Portage Canal and Bayou Pont, flooding areas of Pecan Acres and Pleasant View.

In 2018, light rainfall marked Saturday afternoon and evening, but beautiful weather on Sunday helped boost the total three-day attendance to approximately 30,000. Rain marked Saturday afternoon of the 2019 event, with three-day attendance pegged at 35,000.

No festivals were during the height of Coronavirus 2019 restrictions, in 2020 and 2021. The event resumed in 2022, with the added feature of a Friday opening parade, at 6 p.m., featuring five floats, two dance troops, decorated ATV vehicles and bicycles, and New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians. An estimated 5,000 were on hand along Olinde and Main Streets for the parade, and overall attendance for the three days was numbered at 40,000.

In an attempt to curb the financial losses of each previous Harvest Festival, the City of New Roads considered partnering with the Louisiana Fair & Festival Association in organizing the 2023 event, and allowing the Association to assume full sponsorship in 2024.

The City ultimately decided to coordinate the 2023 event alone, as in the past by with a scaled-down programme. It was held three weeks later than usual, on the first three-day weekend in November, in deference to the statewide primary governmental elections being held on the traditional festival weekend in October.

Ideal weather prevailed but attendance was substantially smaller than in previous years, with 5,000 estimated to have attended in 2023, per the Pointe Coupée Banner's subsequent news article.