

150 Years of the Centre County Grange Encampment and Fair

Every year, thousands of people descend upon the small community of Centre Hall for the last remaining fair of its kind in America. Between August 16 and 24, the Centre County Grange Fair will welcome more than 200,000 visitors through its gates. The fair will showcase more than 5000 exhibits, premier equine shows, a rodeo, motor sport competitions and rides to entertain all ages. But the truly unique aspect of the event is that the fairgrounds become a home away from home, where a family will move into 1 of almost 1,000 green army tents, joining 1,500 RVs and trailers, to create a temporary community on the 260-acre property.

Seeing the Grange Fair as it is today, it is hard to imagine this family tradition grew from a simple, day-long “Granger’s Pic-nic” more than a century ago.

Established in 1867, the impact of the newly formed National Grange would capture the attention of a local farmer, Leonard Rhone. In February 1874, Rhone helped organize Progress Grange #96 in Centre Hall, followed by Centre County Pomona Grange #13 that September. Rhone would be instrumental in organizing many Granges throughout Centre County.

Rhone was very active in the Grange at all levels and realized two things needed to happen for the Grange to grow in those early years. First, he realized there had to be some event to bring the Granges of Centre County together. Rhone also knew this event had to be something that would create an interest in the minds of non-Grangers.

On September 24, 1874, the first Granger’s Pic-nic was held at Leech’s Woods, located near Linden Hall, roughly 3.5 miles west of Centre Hall and the present fairgrounds.

The October 1 edition of *The Centre Reporter* (Centre Hall, PA) describes the one-day event: “The pic-nic of Centre Co. Grangers, in Leech’s Woods, near this place, on last Thursday, was a great success. An immense crowd was present” with the “number of persons present was not far from 3000” from all parts of the county.

That first Granger’s Pic-nic covered eight to ten acres and included many speeches promoting the Grange fraternity and a parade led by the band from Boalsburg.

During its early years, the picnic was held in various spots around Centre County. In 1890, Progress Grange #96, under the guidance of Leonard Rhone, would purchase 26 acres on the western edge of Centre Hall, which would become the permanent home of the encampment.

Exactly when camping started at the pic-nic is not known, but it is believed it began around 1885, when Grangers coming from the far corners of the county would arrive the day before the event and camp until the day following the pic-nic. In 1887, old Civil War tents were borrowed from the Pennsylvania National Guard and the tradition of camping at the fair began. Once the land was purchased outside of Centre Hall, wooden floors were provided for those renting one of the tents, along with a table, bench and bunk.

The importance of agriculture has always been a part of the Granger’s Pic-nic. Livestock, including cows, goats, sheep, rabbits, and hogs – continue to be shown by members of the county’s 4-H and FFA.

Contests are still held to see whose garden has produced the best fruit, vegetable, or flowers; who made the best canned goods and who baked the best pie, cake, or cookie, and who created the supreme handicrafts.

The simple exhibits on farming have evolved to vendors selling their wares of all types. The entertainment of a simple parade and speakers has grown to include regional entertainment along with major recording artists. Local politicians still make their pitches to their constituents.

In 2024, Leonard Rhone's simple idea of a Granger's Pic-nic celebrates its 150th anniversary as the Centre County Grange Fair. The right to have a tent, along with their designated areas, has been handed down through the generations.

Walking through the modern fairgrounds, it is hard to imagine this all started as a simple one day picnic, which grew over the decades. So much has changed over the years, yet so much remains the same, much like the traditions handed down from one generation to the next.

For more information and a schedule of events, visit www.grangefair.com.