

HISTORY of the CHATHAM COUNTY COLORED AGRICULTURAL FAIR, INC.

It is fitting that a history of the Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair, Inc. be written on the occasion of its 31st season as a memorial tribute to Robert Gade Bryant; for had Mr. and Mrs. R. G. Bryant of Moncure not given a tract of land for erection of an office building to house a Farm and Home Agent for the black people of Chatham County, probably the Fair would never have come into existence.

After the Bryants had given the land, money was raised to build an office building which was dedicated on Friday, June 6, 1947 as the only one of its kind in the nation. The Farm and Home Organization, with Mr. Bryant as president, held regular monthly meetings on the first Saturday of each month at 2:00 o'clock from 1946 to the present.

The Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair, Inc., like most significant undertakings, came into being out of need. Mildred Bright Payton, the Chatham County Negro Home Demonstration Agent, who transferred from Franklin County to begin work in Chatham on October 1, 1947, saw this need. (As the title would indicate, this was in pre-integration days.) Mrs. Payton was Chatham County's second black home economics agent. Previously, Miss Lovie Smith had served from January 1, 1947 to August 1, 1947.

Traditionally, an "Achievement Day" was being held annually by Home Demonstration Clubs and 4-H Clubs to exhibit improvement in the household arts—cooking, sewing, canning, etc.—with the assistance of an agent of the Agricultural Extension Service. Traditionally, also, awards and prizes were given for these improvements. So abundant were the exhibits that the Home Agent was hard put to find sufficient prizes. The idea presented itself: Why not secure a carnival and have a County Fair in order to use the proceeds to provide prizes? These, of course, would be termed "premiums." During 1948, Mrs. Payton presented this idea to the Home Demonstration Clubs who were enthusiastic about it. Not so much enthusiasm was engendered when the plan was presented to the Farm and Home Organization.

The president of the Farm and Home Organization, R. G. Bryant, always supportive of the Fair effort, granted Payton permission to present Robert Hawkins, long-time president of the Vance County Colored Fair as a speaker at the monthly meeting of the Organization in the spring of 1949. The Organization was not in favor of a Fair. Mr. Bryant permitted Mrs. Payton to present another speaker some months later. The Organization still refused to go along with the proposed undertaking. Of this attitude, Mrs. Laura L. Lee (later to

become one of the Fair's most efficient secretaries) was quoted by Dr. Ira Laster—whose doctoral dissertation was concerned with Chatham County Organizations, as saying:

“They weren't making anybody go along with the fair—but I just frankly speaking could see so much work in the fair, that I guess I was just lazy—I didn't want to go into all that. I just couldn't see anything but the work—that was all I was seeing in the fair. But they voted to have a fair—you know, most people wanted it and the majority ruled, so I, of course, didn't stay away. But I kept on and I think this is one of the finest things that could have happened to the community ... we grew to know each other so much better by having this fair. It has meant so much to compare what we bring with one another.”

A call meeting was held on May 30, 1949 and the Farm and Home Organization voted 16 to 2 in favor of the county fair proposal.

The next problem was that of procuring a carnival with all the trappings—including ferris wheel, merry-go-round, etc., which many black children of Chatham had never seen. While this was under consideration, the Fair was chartered on January 11, 1950 by the following incorporators and members of the first Board of Directors: R. G. Bryant, C. W. Baldwin, J. C. Gowins, E. C. Lee, E. H. Powell, Fred Dowdy, H. M. Lee, Noble Womble, Mamie D. Jones, J. A. Turner, (Farm Agent), Mildred B. Payton (Home Agent), and E. J. Dark (Chairman, Chatham County Board of Commissioners).

With the assistance of Mr. J. B. Mayes, president of the Durham County Colored Fair and his booking agent, Mr. C. M. Lumley, Payton was given a contract (a printed document) by a carnival operating as DuPont Shows. R. G. Bryant alone ventured to sign the contract with the DuPont Shows.

The first Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair was held in the fall of 1950. At a rental fee of \$250.00, the Fair was held on the ground of the old Goldston Lumber Company in Pittsboro. Much work was required to prepare the grounds for the fair, but Bryant and the Board members joined by J. C. Paige, B. F. Paige, and Manley Edwards of Siler City among others proved equal to the task. A tent was rented by the County Home Demonstration Council to house the exhibits. J. A. Turner, Farm Agent was in charge of the agricultural exhibits, including livestock. He served in this capacity from the beginning of the Fairs until his retirement in 1975. Despite rain, mud, and a leaky exhibit tent, some 3,000 people came, and the fair was considered a tremendous success.

For the second Fair season Pittsboro's Mayor J. A. ("Atlas") Farrell, Sr. generously offered a tract of land (the present fairgrounds) to be used rent-free by the Fair Association. Though a tent was again used for the exhibits, the 2nd annual Fair, held September 17-22, 1951 was a remarkable improvement over the first. Some 500 Fair "catalogs" containing an extensive premium list and listing 81 advertisers and 22 additional patrons were made and circulated in Chatham and adjoining counties. In an effort to save money, the "catalogs" from 1951 through 1956 were "homemade" with the Home Agent, Mildred Payton, typing the premium list and doing ad layouts by stylus, while 4-Her Guytana Horton (now Mrs. Kermit DeGraffenreidt) did the mimeographing.

More than 100 bona fide exhibitors, displayed more than three hundred items including

canned products, baked goods, girl's and women's clothing, needlework, art, crafts, and horticultural products. Of special interest was the Farm-and-Home booth by Mr. and Mrs. Bennie Paige of Siler City whose booth illustrated every phase of their farm-home living. A partial list included 21/2 acres of tobacco, 5 acres of wheat, 15 acres corn, 1 1/2 bales cotton, 1/2 acre milo, 1/2 acre potatoes, 150 chickens, 5 hogs, 6 pigs, two cows and 930 quarts of canned goods. Attendance at the Fair was estimated at '7,000.

Giant strides were made prior to the 3rd annual Fair held September 14-19, 1952. The 11-acre tract used for the fairgrounds had been purchased from Mayor Farrell for \$1,000.00. The Home Demonstration clubs of the county furnished the purchase price—they paid the total \$1,000. Each of the sixteen clubs, namely, Bear Creek-Bonlee, Bynum-Hamlet, Goldston, Haw River, Hinton Beckwith, Lambert Chapel-Jordan Grove, Milliken, Mitchell, Mt. View, Mt. Zion, New Hope, Pittsboro, St. Luke, St. Matthews-Alston Chapel, Taylor's Chapel, and Webster made substantial contributions, led by Hinton-Beckwith's contribution of \$102.59 and Mt. View's contribution of \$107.00. The efforts were sparked by the County Council President, Mrs. Mattie Paige of Siler City, who succeeded Mrs. Roxie Dark Small, an indefatigable worker with the Farm and Home Organization.

Also, prior to the 1953 Fair, a 40 by 100 feet concrete block exhibit hall was constructed at an approximate cost of \$5,000.00. Many men of the county, with President Bryant in the forefront donated free labor. Mayor Farrell brought his tractor and worked with the black fair for a day, clearing the land so that construction could begin. Home Demonstration clubs again raised money for the building with Mt. View leading in club contributions with \$100.00. The bulk of the remaining cost was realized from the Fair operation.

All these were noted in *The Carolinian*, a Raleigh weekly newspaper published by Paul R. Jervay which devoted practically the entire September 13, 1953 edition to the Chatham County Fair.

Owning its grounds and a nearly-paid-for exhibit building, the Chatham Fair was on its way.

Continuous efforts were made to enhance the quality of the Fair. Additional Directors named included Edward Burnette, Manley Edwards, Mrs. Lizzie Horton, William Johnson, Charles Lambert, B. F. Paige, J. Clemon Paige, and Mrs. Daisy Gowins McQuillar who served the Fair in the all-important position of treasurer from its early days until her death in 1968. It is impossible to name all those who gave valuable service to the Fair, however some who got their first test of being "lawmen" by serving as Fair police included Harvey Green, S. D. McQuillar, London Richardson, Alonzo Alston, Ben Brooks, Charlie Baldwin, Charles Lambert and R. G. Bryant.

For the first three years of the Fair, they were called "Law and Order Men" and wore only arm bands as symbols of authority; after the three years, however, they were sworn in by the Chatham County Sheriff as temporary deputy sheriffs and wore badges. Six "deputy sheriffs" per year were pressed into service by the Fair.

Club women donated their services as ticket sellers, ticket takers, and again those who volunteered their labor are too numerous to list, however clubs helped the fair to operate smoothly by rotating work nights between clubs. Some of the Club presidents during the Fair's beginning include Mesdames Mary A. Alston, Roxanna Burnette, Margie Chavis, F. L. Ellis, Bessie Goldston, Roberta Hadley, Mabel Johnson, Margaret Jones,

Madgelene Lambert, Gatha Lassiter, Minnie Lee, Margaret McLeod, Arnetta Nunn, Susie Riggsbee, Marie Siler, Bessie Taylor, Nathalia Turner, Lavonia Wicker, and Blanche Williams.

New features incorporated in the basic fair program through the years included such activities as 4-H Field Crop Exhibit Contest, Junior 4-H Canning Contest, Adult 3-Jar Canning Contest, 4-H Clothing Contest, 4-H Corn Meal Muffin Bake-off, Vegetable Tray Contest, Fashion Show, Flower Show, Doll Show, Talent Contest, School Day Parade, Awards Program, Band Concert, Music Contest, and Dairy Cattle Show. Outstanding in Cattle Shows were those put on by C. W. Bryant, the G. W. Herring family, Mrs. Annie M. Hart, and Leroy Gowins.

Since its early days, much has been added by the outstanding Home Economics booths by Mrs. Elizabeth Edwards of Siler City, and Mrs. Thelma Groves Turner of Goldston.

At the 5th annual Fair in 1954, the "Miss Piedmont" Beauty Pageant was initiated by the Home Agent, Mrs. Payton, who directed the Pageant through 1962 under the sponsorship of the Home Demonstration County Council. In 1963, Miss Lucille Rodgers of Pittsboro, a former "Miss Piedmont" (now a Ph.D., she has since been a finalist in the national "Miss Black America" contest representing the University of Wisconsin where she has been a faculty member) served as directress. When Lucille entered college, her mother, Mrs. Lillie Rodgers, took over the directing duties. (Later the contest became "Miss Chatham County Fair", but in 1980 it has regained its "Miss Piedmont" status.)

The 7th annual Fair held September 10-15, 1956 enjoyed its most successful season to date. More than two thousand entries were made by several hundred exhibitors with more than \$1,000.00 being awarded in prizes and premiums. The State Inspector of Agricultural Fairs complimented the exhibits as being some of the best he had inspected. Adding special interest to the basic program were such events as a 4-H Dairy Cattle Show, Band Concert, Talent Contest, Cotton Fashion Show, Poultry Day with free barbecue dinner, and an Awards Day on Saturday with Fair president, R. O. Bryant giving a dairy calf to a deserving 4-H girl.

The novel feature of the 1957 Fair was most basic to the purpose of an agricultural fair. A county-wide Garden Contest, sponsored by the Home Demonstration Council culminated with a unique booth put on by the winner. Chief emphasis was on the growing of a year-round garden and growing "new" vegetables to introduce into the family meals for improved nutrition. Mrs. E. V. Lee of Moncure, first prize winner, was awarded a prize of \$100.00. Her booth titled "Spring Garden in the Cans, Fall Garden in the Ground" drew much favorable comment from the spectators. Mrs. Elnora Paige of Star Route, Siler City won 2nd prize of \$50.00 and Mrs. Hattie Alston of Route 3, Pittsboro won 3rd prize of \$25.00.

The growth of the Fair continued with the 1958 Fair boasting some 3,000 entries and the awarding of more than 550 premiums. Through the years many persons from various communities served on the Board of Directors including Alonzo Alston, Ollie Burnette, James Gunter, Mrs. Omega Herring, Nash Horton, Mrs. Ruth McLendon, Mrs. Irene Nettles (who served as assistant secretary), Mrs. Lillie E. Perry (Lee) who has served as secretary, Tommie Stone, and Mrs. Nathalia Turner. Special recognition should go to Mrs. Mamie Jones, first Fair Secretary, and to Mrs. Vallie Alston, a versatile and efficient fair officer who has served variously since the Fair's beginning as a

chairperson of various committees, secretary, and treasurer—in which latter position she is presently serving.

After Mrs. Payton's resignation in October 1959, Mrs. Hassie Torain came to Chatham County as Home Agent on January 1, 1960 and thereafter directed the home economics fair exhibits until her resignation in 1962. Ms. Edith Williams served as Home Agent from 1963 to 1969 followed by Ms. Marietta Smallwood from November 1969 to June 1974, and Miss Glennie Beasley serving from July 1974 to the present.

During all these years the Fair continued to progress. Running water was installed, an office building was built, and new program features included a Senior Citizen's Day, and an invited Square Dance performing troupe.

Upon the retirement of Mr. J. A. Turner, who had served as Farm Agent from the beginning, Mr. Perry Wyatt came to Chatham May 1975 and was Farm Agent to April 1978, followed by Mr. Rodney Johnson who served from September 1978 to April 1979, and Mr. Fletcher Barber, Jr. Farm Agent from August 1, 1979 to the present.

The year 1977 was a negatively eventful one for the Fair. Regretfully accepted was the resignation of the president, Robert Gade Bryant who had guided the Fair since its organization in 1950. The Fair association was saddened by the deaths of 1st Vice President C. W. Baldwin and long-time supporter and agricultural advisor, Gordon W. Herring. The Fair catalog carried the president's "farewell" message to his Fair "friends" and memoriams to the late Messrs. Baldwin and Herring.

"Charlie Baldwin Day" was observed by the Fair on Tuesday, September 6, 1977. On that day the "Black History Museum" was dedicated. The "museum" is a cabin built by slave Bob Milliken who was purchased from the Fayetteville Slave Market. He and his bride, Sallie, lived in the cabin after the Civil War and reared their three children, Ike, Laura, and Dena. Daughter Laura reared her family of eight in the cabin; and her youngest daughter, Annie Bell, reared her family of four in the cabin before moving to a modern home. Cabin-builder Bob Milliken's descendants still reside in Chatham County. The granddaughter of the last Slave Master now resides in Sanford. The cabin was donated to the late Mr. Baldwin by Mr. Willis Wrenn of Siler City. It was moved from its location about seven miles northwest of Pittsboro to its present location on the fairgrounds under the supervision of the Black History Museum Committee chairman, Mr. C. W. Bryant, at a cost of \$1,272. Chinking and daubing were done chiefly by Mr. and Mrs. George Julian Jones, and Mrs. Mildred Payton, Committee Secretary who devoted several days to the project assisted by Mesdames Gladys Simmons and Rachel Rodgers. Mr. J. E. Ramsey, Jr. is treasurer of the Committee.

Organizations and individuals contributing \$25.00 or more to the Museum project are: Executive Committee N. C. Federation of Negro Women, Chatham County Community Branch NAACP, Chatham County Branch NAACP, Chatham-Lee Credit Union, First Baptist Church (6th Avenue), Corinth, Hamlet's Chapel, Mt. Sinai, St. Luke, Annie Mae Ferrington, Fannie E. Ferrington, Janie Bright Forrester,

Marie C. Johnson, Dr. Ira Laster, Jr., Marjorie Payton Lawson, Evelyn B. Lee, Thomas C. Lee, Tyrone Lee, Ernestine Brewer Mangum, Nina L. Marsh, Mildred B. Payton, Mary B. Perkins, Mary B. Setzer, and Roxie Dark Small (in Memoriam). The Oliver Marsh family donated, hauled, and spread sand and gravel in landscaping the grounds.

At the beginning of a new decade, the Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair, Inc. has Charles Lambert at the helm. Mr. Lambert, who took over at the resignation of Mr. Bryant in 1977 has held practically every position in the Fair except that of secretary and treasurer and is thoroughly familiar with every aspect of the association. Serving with Mr. Lambert are Willie Andrews, 1st Vice President, C. W. Bryant, 2nd Vice President, Ms. Louvenia McIntosh, Secretary, Mrs. Lillie Lee, Asst. Secretary, Mrs. Value Alston, Treasurer. Members of the Board of Directors include: Emma Atwater, Ollie Burnette, Annie Mae Farrington, Annie M. Hart, George Julian Jones, Evelyn B. Lee, Mattie L. Paige, Mildred B. Payton, Margaret B. Pollard, H. A. Richardson, Lillie Rodgers, Elvie Scurlock, Glennie Beasley, Home Agent, Fletcher Barber, Jr., Farm Agent and Gus Murshison, County Board of Commissioners.

Since Mr. Charles Lambert took office in 1977, the kitchens and eating facilities have been much improved with Committees headed by Rev. Annie P. Hart and C. W. Bryant. (Mr. and Mrs. Lambert were previously proprietors of a Baltimore restaurant where Mr. Lambert was chef.)

New inspiration has been added by Mrs. Christine Overton, a retired nurse of Connecticut, who has returned home to Chatham and is (gung) ho for the Fair, sponsoring fund raising efforts to improve the buildings and grounds, Publicity Director Elisha Denny who has been authorized to prepare a brochure, and retired school principal and Chatham-Lee Credit Union president, Charles D. Marsh, who has become the Fair's first Public Relations Chairman.

Mr. Lambert, 2nd president of the Chatham County Colored Agricultural Fair, Inc., has publicly pledged to carry on in the great tradition established by R. G. Bryant, the "Founding Father" and president for more than a quarter of a century.

Fair History Committee:

Mrs. Elizabeth Edwards
Ms. Fannie E. Fearrington
George Julian Jones
Mrs. Madgelene Lambert
Mrs. Mildred B. Payton

[1980]