

## Note to readers

The history of the *Stanstead County Agricultural Society* summarized in this document is written largely from the minutes of this society. In this context it is important to mention that the minutes of the years 1880 to 1911 were missing, as these documents were destroyed in a fire in the house where they were kept. These years must have been rich in information because it is only since 1872 that the society was permanently installed in Ayer's Cliff, then called Ayer's Flat.

Similarly, visual documentation was scarce, only a few undated photos and no site or construction plans. The minutes were our main guide with the limitation that this type of document implies. The quality of the minutes depends on the notes taken during the meetings. We also had to adapt to the different calligraphies and uneven notes.

## History of the Stanstead County Agricultural Society

### Foundation mission and regulations

On June 30, 1845, the *Stanstead County Agricultural Society* (SACS) was founded in Stanstead Plain. The membership fee was set at 5 shillings per year. At the July 12 meeting held in Georgeville, it was stated that the purpose of the "*Stanstead County Agricultural Society*" (SACS) was "*to promote the prosperity and welfare of the county and to encourage the improvement of agriculture and the importance of stock raising*". The first competitions were held in Langmaid Flat (*Hatley*) on September 19, 1845.

And at the meeting of August 2, 1846, it was planned to hold a competition of cereals (*grains*) and crafts called "Seed Fair" in the winter, on January 8, 1847. Until 1927, this second annual competition was held. The two annual fairs alternated from village to village until a permanent location was established, first in Stanstead Plain from 1866 to 1871 and then in Ayer's Flat in 1872.

As early as 1846, the administration of the company was structured, directors were elected and auditors were appointed, and members of the executive were sent to attend the *New York State Agricultural Show* in Saratoga to see how such an organization was run.

### Permanent installations

In 1867, Carlos Pierce, then president of the SACS, proposed that the agricultural fair be permanently located on Stanstead Plain, and petitions were signed in support of this proposal.

The subject would generate internal debate for four or five years, during which time the agricultural fair was still held in Stanstead Plain. But after Carlos Pierce's death in 1870, there was little talk of it, although in 1874 a letter was sent to the SACS Board of Directors in an unsuccessful attempt to bring the annual event back to the Old Fair ground in Stanstead Plain.

In 1871, the agricultural fair was introduced at Ayer's Flat in Hatley (Ayer's Cliff). The idea of putting the agricultural fair in a permanent space evolved. For the first time in 1872, it was indicated that the fair was presented in a permanent facility. This site already had facilities that facilitated the presentation of

an agricultural fair. The County Building (later the Main Building), the main building on Main Street in Ayer's Flat was loaned to them during the event and board meetings were held in this building. Furthermore, it is likely that the stadium predates the establishment of SACS in Ayer's Flat because in 1877, the Board of Directors passed a resolution **to renovate** the stadium. Already in 1870, SACS was a partner with the County Agricultural Society. We have not found any indication of the construction of this building so we believe it is possible that the horticultural pavilion was already on site.

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Carlton Ayer played an important role in the development of a permanent site at Ayer's Flat. First, he was hired to build exhibition grounds around the County Building. He then leased land for the event, which he eventually sold. He became president of SACS for about 30 years. For the first time, in 1875, the financing of the loan for the purchase of land was discussed. The financial means of the SACS did not allow the acquisition of a large piece of land, so it was rented and bought small lot by small lot.

After his death, Carlton Ayer's widow and later his sons continued to sell various parcels of land to SACS.

## Administration

In 1997, to meet the requirements of the Ministry of Agriculture, MAPAQ, which abolished the law on agricultural societies, the *Stanstead County Agricultural Society (SACS)* was created. The SACS, which was a corporation, became a non-profit organization. Despite this change in status, the name was retained and the right to exemption from paying taxes on the land was maintained.

The Board of Directors was made up of representatives from the various townships of Stanstead County until 1993. Since then, members are appointed by the Board of Directors regardless of their township of residence.

## Finance

The income for the year 1847 was 220 pounds, 150 of which came from government contributions and 50 from membership fees. Expenses amounted to 220 pounds, 100 of which were spent on prizes for the winners of the competitions.

Throughout its history, the SACS borrowed money from the bank to invest in the purchase of land, materials for the construction and maintenance of a building or to purchase a valuable animal to allow for good quality bridling. There is also talk of borrowing to pay the bills while waiting for the next subsidies. In 1873, the annual budget was \$1,211 of which the SACS received \$656 in subsidies, or 54% of its budget. In 1911, SACS received special government assistance to help them financially. However, the subsidies were mainly used to pay the prizes offered to the winners, which represented relatively large sums, and to pay the judges, who were specialists and even agronomists. In 1915, financial assistance was requested to pay off the debt.

In 1919, the governments announced that they would not pay for the judges. Sponsorship was sought (first sponsorship), and the Bank of Commerce awards were given to Shorthorns, Herefords, Ayrshires, Holsteins, Jerseys and the Brown Swiss.

If at the founding of SACS two thirds of the budget came from government grants, over the years these contributions have diminished to the point of insignificance. The disengagement of the governments leads them to diversify their operations in order to make them profitable and to ensure the survival of the SACS. In spite of these recurring financial problems, the SACS mission of agricultural competitions was maintained and the portion of the budget allocated to the various prizes remained important. The decrease in the granting of subsidies for the operating budget is significant from the beginning of the 20th century.

Following the First World War, more precisely in 1921, consideration was given to renting the grounds of the agricultural fair on a year-round basis to the Department of Defense to allow for the training of future soldiers. This resulted in a 9-day lease paying \$100/day and a lease to the Canadian Artillery Brigade (number of days undetermined). During the First World War, the Red Cross requested a space. And a tent was erected to sell sandwiches made by the ladies of Ayer's Cliff, the profits from these sales were donated to the Red Cross. During the Great Depression, the amount of subsidies was reduced. The parking lot was made chargeable, the amount of money allocated for advertising was reduced and the admission fee was increased. Again in 1932, the army rented the grounds of the agricultural fair for a 12-day training camp. In 1940, the agricultural fair association questioned the relevance of holding an agricultural fair during the war.

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At the conclusion of this discussion, it was decided to present a reduced agricultural fair. The use of the Dining Hall was allowed to the Red Cross. In 1943, it was proposed to pay the exhibitors in "War saving stamps". Different strategies were developed to finance the operations of the agricultural fair. In 1925, SACS rented space for storing cars... now, most of the boats were stored in the large sheds during the winter.

In an effort to make their facilities more profitable, stalls were rented on a year-round basis for the first time in 1947. The Main Building was regularly rented for flea markets and auctions.

All sorts of strategies are employed to fund the SACS. And it is in this perspective that, over the years, the show occupies a more important place. The shows presented aim at attracting a younger and more numerous clientele.

In 1960, they thought of merging the agricultural fairs of Ayer's Cliff and Drummond in favor of an agricultural fair in Cookshire but, the board of directors decided that the agricultural fair would remain in Ayer's Cliff.

## Architectural complex and property values

Over the years, SACS acquired the fifteen or so lots that make up the 22.2 acre property of the agricultural fair. In successive stages, they purchased and built the architectural complex that we know today. When SACS acquired the County Building (Main Building), it was stipulated in the contract that if they wished to dispose of this building and the land surrounding the building (approximately 1 acre), SACS must first offer the building to the municipality of Ayer's Cliff.

In the 1927 budget, the value of the SACS properties was established at \$9,333, of which \$3,518 was for the land and \$5,815 for the buildings. In 1992, the evaluation of the buildings of the agricultural fair at the MRC is \$258,000. They are exempt from taxes and pay only for services an amount that is set by the municipality.

## Employment

Certainly, there has always been volunteerism associated with agricultural fair events. But some jobs were paid. For example, in 1879, the secretary-treasurer was paid 5% "of any money that passed through her hands. Similarly, Carlton Ayer was paid a salary for his work before and during the agricultural fair. Fair helpers were fed and paid \$2 per day. Beginning in 1957, meals for volunteers were no longer free.

## The competitions

Over the years, various means have been used to achieve the goals of SACS, but competitions have been at the heart of their actions since its founding and until now. Throughout its history, the SACS executive has worked to clarify the rules of eligibility for the various competitions. The first bylaws stated that membership in the Society was required to participate in the various competitions.

In addition, in 1863, a regulation was established to the effect that competitors must reside in Stanstead County. For the first time in 1932, the possibility of accepting entries from Compton County farms was considered, but it was not until 1966 that such entries were allowed, although in 1955 Bolton farms were allowed to enter and Richmond farms in 1958.

For the holding of the first competitions in 1845, eleven regulations were drawn up, applicable to the five different sections: Section I: Horses; Section II: Cattle; Section III: Sheep; Section IV: Farms; Section V: *Ploughmen*.

For the winter agricultural fair called "Seed Fair", the 4 sections put in competition were specified: Section I: Wheat, oats, corn, potatoes, rutabagas, *beans* and maple sugar; Section II: Butter and cheese; Section III: Sewing; Section IV: Leather products. These first competitions were held in Georgeville.

At that time, judges, often agronomists, toured the farms entered in the competition. In 1871, the amounts of the prizes awarded for the quality of the farm varied between \$10 and \$50. The different categories evaluated were the quality of the crop rotation system, the division of the farm by fences, the condition of the fences, the condition of the ditches, the weeding, the condition of the livestock, the farm buildings, the pasture, the meadow and the weeding. These different categories of awards for excellence indicate the importance of evaluating the work and the quality that is expected of successful farms.

In 1937, the SACS acted on behalf of the breeders and asked the governments to investigate the high prices of hay, according to the SACS, these high prices were causing a prejudice to the breeders.

## SACS animal purchases and animal health

In the early years, April 1846, a vote was taken for the sum of 100 pounds to purchase a bull to improve the livestock. In 1854, the purchase of a horse for \$600 (the first in dollars) is mentioned, a very important sum for the time. In the same minutes, there is mention of the sale of animals. It seems that the SACS helped to improve the quality of the animals by buying high quality animals for the fair that were then sold. But the agricultural fair also allowed the implantation of breeds that did not exist in America such as a group of sheep that was brought from Scotland. In 1913, new classes of sheep appear in the competition; South Down, Orford, Hamshires. In 1920, there are also several breeds of pigs in competition: Soland, China, Berkshire, Chester white, Yorkshire, and crossbred.

In spite of a delicate financial situation in 1932, \$500 was borrowed to purchase a stallion. It seems that budgetary problems never prevented the SACS from maintaining its original orientations. In 1942, a loan was taken for the purchase of a Belgian stallion and the minutes contain resolutions concerning the purchase and resale of animals; horses, bulls, pigs, sheep, etc. In 1947, it is specified that stalls are built for the horses of the society. From the 1950s onwards, there is no mention of animal trading.

Since the breeding is done by insemination, it is no longer necessary to buy animals for reproduction, so private companies took over the mandate of the SACS. In 1964, SACS became interested in the project of opening an insemination center in the county.

Concerns about contagious animal diseases were raised and, as early as 1929, blood tests were required for animals attending the agricultural fair, at great cost to the breeders. In 1958, there was concern about Brucellosis, the SACS circulated information on the effects of this disease and in 1962, the Department of Agriculture was asked to pay for vaccines against this disease. In 1979, the vaccines for this disease are valid for a period of 6 months. In 1984, any animal that did not have its vaccinations was prohibited from entering the grounds of the agricultural fair. In 2004, SACS requires that all horses entering the fairgrounds have passed the Coggins test, the disease that this test detects is equine infectious anemia. This is a viral disease that can be fatal to the horse.

## Training, education and upgrading of knowledge

The SACS intervenes at different levels to improve the quality of breeding and agriculture. Buying books, presenting films on livestock and agriculture and organizing conferences on the most important topics.

In addition, we have indications in some of the minutes that from the beginning of the 20th century, the SACS sent some boys to Macdonald College to be trained in the various techniques of agriculture. In 1929, the possibility of sending 10 boys to the Lennoxville experimental farm for a little training was discussed rather than sending 2 or 3 to Macdonald College for another year.

*"Sir William Macdonald gave large sums of money to McGill University. James W. Robertson, the federal government's commissioner of agriculture and dairying in the 1890s. Together, this unlikely duo created the Macdonald Campus of McGill University and revolutionized agricultural education in Canada.*

*At the end of the 19th century, rural education was in ruins. Populations were too scattered, teachers were scarce, and infrastructure was too poorly maintained to accommodate students. In 1904, Sir William invested \$1.5 million in 561 acres of farmland. When he opened a school on this land in 1907, it was called Macdonald College, located in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue on the western tip of the island of Montreal. James Robertson was principal of the college for the first three years of its existence and assembled a team of high-caliber teachers. Macdonald's researchers immediately set to work growing new varieties of clover, alfalfa and soybeans.* "Excerpt on the founding of Macdonald College, Macdonald College website

In 1915, during the agricultural fair, there was an exhibition of seeds and vegetables from the experimental farm in Lennoxville (founded in 1914).

In 1950, study tours were organized in Ontario for young breeders. Speakers were constantly invited to speak on agriculture, the importance of good pasture, the benefits of mixed feed, animal health, demonstrations on sheep shearing or cheese making, organic farming or, closer to home, on seeding by following satellite indications, etc.

### Popular festival

In 1852, the event was publicized by placing an ad in the Stanstead Journal. From then on, a great deal of effort was made to inform the population of the agricultural fair. In 1866, admission fees were 25¢ for men, half price for children and free for women. In the middle of the 19th century, the agricultural fairs were very popular events, and it was already a matter of concern that two agricultural fairs should not be held simultaneously.

The agricultural fair was a popular annual gathering that drew large crowds. To prevent overflow, in 1866, the sale of strong beer was prohibited. There is no record of when SACS allowed alcohol on its grounds, but in 1977, it is stated that SACS applied for a liquor license from the municipality and a "Beer Tent" was erected.

In 1879, all other stands or games on the grounds were prohibited during the agricultural fair, and it was mentioned that "the local authorities will be invited to see that no obstacle will prevent the traffic near the fair". Whether by carriage or car, no matter what time of year, traffic problems were a concern for the fair administration. And, depending on the municipal administrations, this generates letters of clarification on the subject. In 1913, it was specified in the minutes that there would be a police presence during the event. In this respect, it seems that the agricultural fairs of the beginning of the 20th century have more enthusiasm overflowing...

### Presentations of non-farm related activities

The program consists mainly of shows in the country spirit, horse and tractor pulls, demonstrations of skill by drivers of wagons with multiple horses, the performance of the traditional magician of all fairs. In addition, there are dance parties and fireworks.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, SACS has presented various activities that are not related to the farm activities, such as cultural, sports, birthday, military, cars, etc.

Thus, in the minutes of 1911 (we do not have the minutes of 1880 to 1911), there is mention of foot races of 100, 250 or 500 yards. The first Olympic Games of the modern era took place in 1896 and the emulation of this important international competition undoubtedly aroused interest in athletics. There was also talk of baseball games.

From 1920 onwards, the agricultural fair began to have a fairground counterpart, among the references to the fairground in 1921, for the first time there is mention of the presence of a carousel. Since then, carousels have become a part of the agricultural fair landscape. The programming of the shows of the agricultural fairs presented until 1970 seem to be similar since they have the same suppliers of shows that they contract jointly, the Maple Leaf shows.

For about forty years, music was played continuously during the agricultural fair and eventually became part of the program of shows presented. In the 1910's, the Ayer's Cliff Band provided the background music. In 1912, the grounds of the agricultural fair were used for the Dominion Festival, it was specified that this event was presented for the benefit of the Ayer's Cliff Band... It seems to be a parade that started in the streets and ended on the grounds of the agricultural fair. Over time the fair transitioned from ambiance music to the presentation of country music shows. The cultural activities program also included the presentation of silent films at first and then sound films. In 1921, the SACS authorized the projection of films during the summer from the main stage.

These different shows required sound and light equipment that was constantly evolving. In 1920, a sum was allocated to tune the piano used during the agricultural fair. But, since the first purchase of a microphone in 1945, each year the purchase or rental of electronic equipment is mentioned.

As a sign of the times, the automobile made its appearance in the programming, car races, demolition derbies, etc. The board of directors was not unanimous about this choice in the program and it led to some debate. Also, the municipality objected to the parking of demolition vehicles in front of the agricultural fairgrounds on the main street.

## Conclusion

Since 1845, despite all the difficulties encountered, SACS has always maintained the fundamentals of its mission, to be an agricultural fair centered on competition as a means to stimulate the quality of products and the breeding of farm animals. The SACS has always focused on family in order to encourage a new generation of farmers.

In the twentieth century, the "fair" component was added with rides and various shows. This addition was part of strategy to make ends meet and to attract more people to the fair and farming.

In 1938, SACS was named the best agricultural fair in Quebec and in 2015 the *Stanstead County Agricultural Society* was the featured agricultural fair at the Calgary Stampede.

Johanne Brouillet, July 2015 ♥