

1955 fair rises out of the ashes

By **GARY L. WEST**
Herald editor

The front page of the Hermiston Herald on Aug. 11, 1955, said “Raging Blaze Destroys Fair Buildings Here.”

One story told of the devastation, under the sub-heading “All Major Wooden Buildings Burned In 20-Minute Blaze.” The fire broke out on Monday, Aug. 8 and wiped out the horse barns, exhibit buildings, flower show buildings and the Columbia Grange concession stand. Two other concession stands, those for the Disabled American Veterans and Eagles Lodge, were damaged beyond repair.

Two tin buildings for commercial and livestock exhibits were spared.

At the press deadline for the Aug. 11 edition, the cause of the fire

HISTORY was believed to be sparks from a controlled burn to get rid of weeds, which spread to the horse barn. The barn was in the midst of being painted at the time.

A temporary school on the grounds in Park Hall was also damaged and 400 feet of fire

Our history

Hermiston History is a weekly feature in the Hermiston Herald. If you have something to share about the history of the greater Hermiston area, send your submission to editor@hermistonherald.com with “Hermiston History” in the subject line. If you have a question about the area’s history you would like the Herald staff to look into, you can send your questions to the same email address with “Hermiston History question” in the subject line.

hose was also destroyed.

Another story on the page was headlined “Bigger, Better Fair Promised.” As firefighters were still mopping up the smoldering flames Fair manager Bennie Hicks and D.R. “Sam” Cook, a county judge (what we would today call a county commissioner in Umatilla County) were working the phones to arrange for tents and other equipment so the fair could still take place as scheduled, a little over a week later, Aug. 17-20.

Portable buildings were borrowed from the Umatilla Ordnance Depot.

“Less than 24 hours after the fire, the grounds was clear and the portable buildings were being set up at the rate of three an hour,” the Herald reported. It went on to say, “a public work party to put the final touches on the grounds

probably will be necessary one day early next week Carpenters Local 933 and the junior chamber of commerce have volunteered to help in any way needed.”

In the Aug. 18 edition, it was reported that the fair did start on time, but not without some mixed reviews.

“You can’t get away from it. The setting of the 1955 Umatilla County Fair is an improvement,” the Herald reported. The on-grounds parking, which had not been utilized previously, was quite popular and the tight arrangement of 65 small ammunition shelters from the Umatilla Ordnance Depot as temporary structures saved fairgoers a lot of walking and were said to be cooler than the old wooden buildings.

But there were some snags. Commercial exhibi-



The front page of the Hermiston Herald on Aug. 11, 1955, reports that all the wooden buildings on the Umatilla County Fairgrounds were destroyed by fire, a little over a week before the fair was scheduled to start. With some borrowed temporary buildings from the Umatilla Ordnance Depot and a lot of volunteer labor, organizers were able to still hold the 1955 fair as scheduled.

tors were still building their booths when the fair opened and many were not finished until the second day of the fair. There were also some communication problems between volunteers and fair officials as volunteers were waiting to be called to help and the fair officials just expected them to show up. The carnival owner also threatened to leave when forced to wait to set up because the parking lot

was being graded. Some tents also didn’t show up.

This will be the final year of the fair in what is now the middle of Hermiston. Next year, the fair is scheduled to be held at new, as-yet-unbuilt facilities near the Hermiston airport. Looking at the grounds of the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center today, it takes more than a little imagination to believe all will be ready for the 2016 Umatilla

County Fair. But if Hermiston and Umatilla County of 1955 could turn mostly bare ground into a fairgrounds after a fire, then the 2015 version, with more people and 21st century engineering, ought to be able to turn the weed patch near the airport into a fairgrounds, rodeo arena and event center in one year’s time, right? After all, we have 51 more weeks to do it in than the community had 60 years ago.

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