



## Early Days of the County Fair 1924-1941

The headline in *The Times-Crescent* of Friday, October 10, 1924, tells the story:

"A bugle blast, blown by a man ... in a brilliant red and white uniform and plumed helmet inaugurated the opening of the first Charles County Fair at 11 A.M., Tuesday (Oct. 7)."

Like most successful undertakings, the fair was begun by a nucleus of dedicated people in the local community. The Extension Service in the person of P.D. Brown was a kind of sponsoring organization, and people such as H.S. Swann, F. Brooke Matthews, Walter Mudd, William Burdette, and Mrs. Xavier Gardiner, Sr., were among the leaders in getting the fair started. The older Charles County natives know all of these folks, while the newer residents will recognize their names simply as the most common on rural mailboxes. "These people were interested in agriculture, and they wanted the opportunity for the farmers to bring in their best products at the season's end," recalls Mitchell Digges, the current fair board president who has been involved for decades.

Read between the lines of that statement and you see that the fair has essentially been a harvest festival in rural Charles County, scheduled ordinarily for late September when the tobacco has been hung in the barns and fields are fallow. Farmers, their wives, and their children competed for prize ribbons in tobacco exhibits, potato sack races, animal breeding, even a rolling pin throwing contest.

The fair was not always held at the current fairgrounds, some 40 acres near Bel Alton purchased for \$800 around 1930 according to one account. The 1924 fair was held at Chapel Point, once a lovely park site on the Port Tobacco River, and another time it was held at the old La Plata town hall, which stood where the theater now is on Charles Street.

With the fair being a harvest festival, it was only natural that pageantry evolve, which happened within the first decade of the county fair's existence.

In 1931, a pageant involving school children depicted the highlights of Charles County history. In 1932, the theme was George Washington's bicentennial, featuring a full-costume dance in the Edelen Bros. Tobacco Warehouse in La Plata. But it was in 1933 that a celebrated author of pageants, Kathleen Reed Coontz of Washington, wrote "The Magic Weed," subtitled "A Pageant of the History and Romance of Tobacco." Coontz was to pen a number of pageants specifically for the fair in ensuing years.

It was also in 1933 that the title "Queen Nicotina" was created, which remains to this day, though the title of her entourage has perhaps luckily been allowed to fade. How many young women today would like to be members of the Court of the Magic Weed, as it was officially titled?

If it seems that folks waxed eloquent about tobacco in those days, they did. It was the staple crop of the farm economy for one thing, and tobacco did not yet enjoy its current bad reputation. Here are the opening lines of one tobacco pageant from the thirties:

"Magic Weed! Beloved Incense of the Red Man's fires; Strange Indian weed that cured and succored ills."

Heady stuff isn't it. Actually, there's a little known truth buried in that couplet, because the tobacco that the Indian grew centuries ago was very strong and tended to put the smoker in nirvana for a while, much as marijuana is said to do.

But back to Queen Nicotina. In 1933, fair officials decided they needed a title for the fair queen they intended to elect. Technically, it should have been spelled "Nicotiana." But they foresaw problems in pronouncing the proper Latin name for tobacco, so they removed the letter "a" and made it "Nicotina." That still didn't help *The Washington Post*, which reported in 1934 that 10,000 people attended the opening day of the Tobacco Festival to watch Maryland Governor Albert Ritchie crown Lenora Garner of Spring Hill as "Queen Victoria."

Interestingly, Queen Nicotina wasn't always chosen as she is today. This year, as in recent years, the title went to the young lady who luckily drew the one rose of certain color from thirteen. There have been other methods of selection, too. But in years gone by, the title went to the young lady who sold the most tickets to the fair dance.

One of the most elaborate pageants of all was held in 1941, when cigarette manufacturers contributed heftily to what became a \$3 000 budget (a lot of money in 1941) for a weeklong Tobacco Festival. A month ahead of time, there were placards proclaiming it all over Washington and Baltimore, as it was an event sponsored by the five Southern Maryland counties - Charles, St. Mary's, Calvert, Prince Georges, and Anne Arundel, which then as now grew a lot of tobacco.

The pageant that year featured enormous facades for various brands of cigarettes side by side with live stage shows in front of elaborate backdrops. Governor and Mrs. Herbert R. O'Connor attended, and there were princesses from every county in Maryland.

Another unusual pageant at the county fair was literally mounted in 1939 by 600 cavalymen from Fort Myers, Va., who rode down here to participate. Mitchell Digges recalls that it took a good deal of finagling to get the Virginia-based cavalymen to a Maryland fair. He recalls that Senator Joseph Tydings had to use his influence, and remembers personally speaking with the captain in charge of the cavalymen, trying to persuade him to participate. The captain's name was George S. Patton, later to become a legendary general during World War II.

A supplement to *The Times-Crescent* in 1930 carried the program for the seventh annual fair, which gives a good indication of what happened at the fair in its early years. Keep in mind that the pageants would begin the very next year, too.

The 1930 program began with horse races and remarks by the Governor. Horse-racing had been popular in Charles County since pre-Revolutionary times as a gentlemanly pastime. And, of course, there were musical programs on all four days of the fair.

The second day, termed Livestock Day, featured more racing as well as the ring judging of cattle, sheep, and swine, followed by a cattle auction at night.

Sportsmen's Day was held on October 3, 1930, the third day of the fair, featuring a Southern Maryland Championship Trap Shoot, a horseshoe pitching contest... and more horse racing. There was also a demonstration of cake baking in the "Women's Building." And at the end of the day, for the third day in a row, there were half-mile mule races.

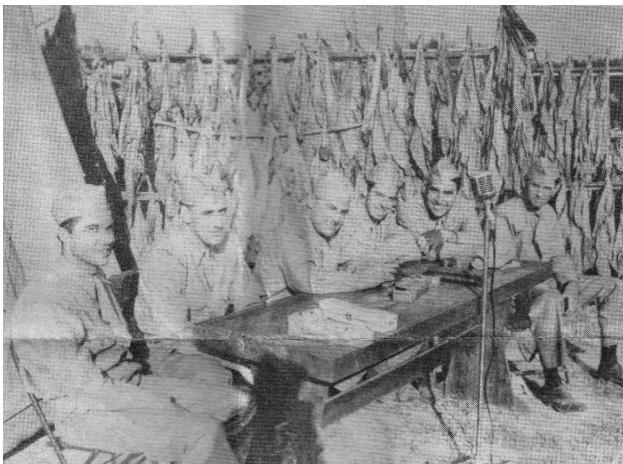
The last day of the fair was a Saturday, October 4, which was children's day. A baby contest was held in the morning, as it is today, and there were judgments of ponies, tobacco and poultry. For the kids, there were dashes, a tug-of-war pitting the McConchie Grange v. the La Plata VFD, and a sack race. Saturday was also the time for two of the more humorous fair events: the rolling-pin throwing contest for "Southern Maryland" women, and the 4:30 p.m. "Husband Calling Contest", also for Southern Maryland women. The final event of the fair was the award of a yearling purebred bull as a gate prize.

The heart of the fair remains the same in 1978. It's still a harvest festival of sorts, and all the rural folk enter canned goods, tobacco, flowers, and what-all as they've done for decades. The poultry, cattle, and swine are still brought for judging, and it's as meaningful as ever he folks who raise them. In fact, a new building to house cattle was put up at the fairgrounds because so many cattle were entered last year, there wasn't room to house them.

Most of the old games from 1930 are gone now, replaced by games no doubt will also be replaced by the year 2000. The fast-pitch contest for youngsters may one day yield to a laser beam Star Wars shootout. Teen Disco will be supplanted by a new dance. But the fair will always be the fair as Charles County's rural heritage endures. That promises to be quite some time yet.

- Daniel Kennedy

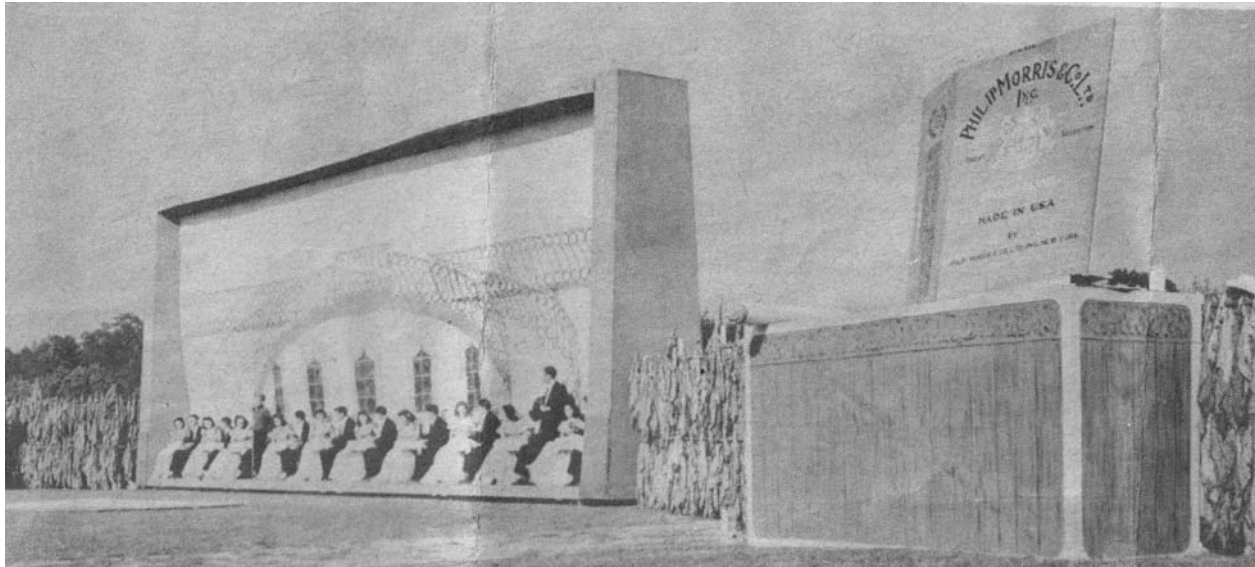
*(Photographs reprinted from the article are shown on the next few pages.)*



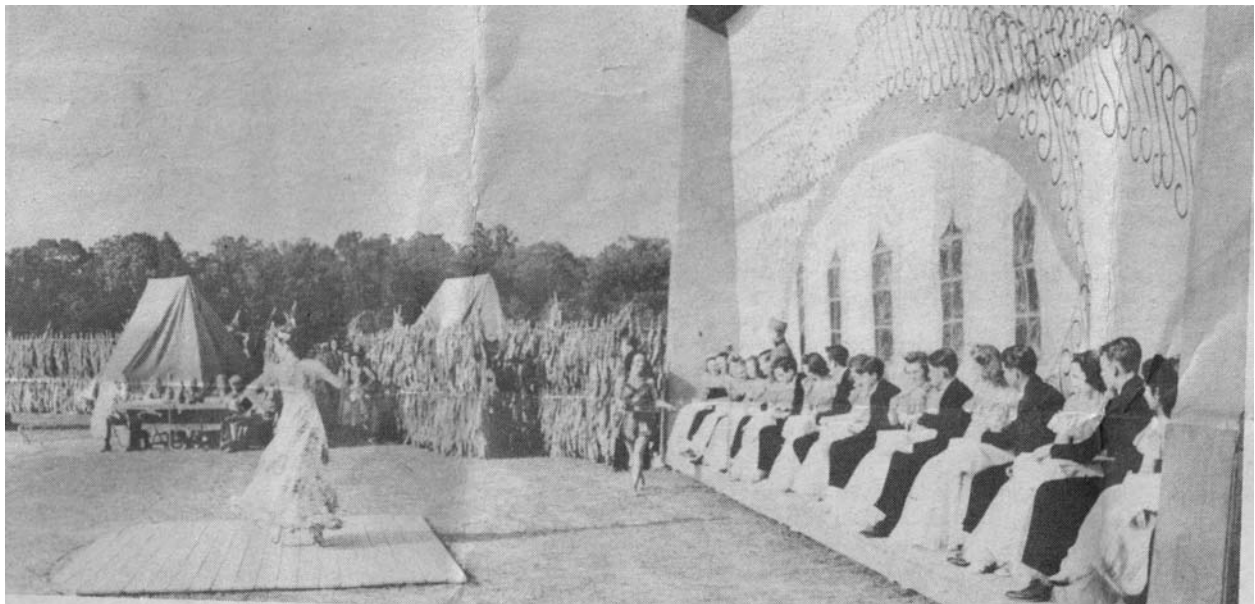
*THE BOYS IN CAMP receive cigarettes from home containing Maryland tobacco in this re-enactment at the 1941 Tobacco Festival.*



*CANNED GOODS have always been a popular entry item at the county fair. Here, some of the women discuss some of the ribbon winners.*



*THIS PHILLP MORRIS DISPLAY (above) is one of the many like it put up for a 1941 Tobacco Festival. The theme for this display reads as follows: "To the soldier who smokes this brand, memories of the modern night club are recalled." The nightclub's customers watch a dancer (below).*





THE GIRLS IN 4-H entered their designs in a County Fair competition in the mid-thirties. They are, from the left. Frances Lorenz Winkler, Mary Berry Brown Moore, Hilda Lyon McCarthy, Kitty Cochran Newcomb, Mary Louise McDonagh Griffin, Kitty Mitchell Clagett, Betty Farrall Vaughan, and Lelia Matthews Mohler.



IN 1932, a County Fair dance in period costume to celebrate George Washington's Bicentennial at Edelen Bros. Warehouse in La Plata.



FRESH FRUIT by the bushel entered in competition at one of the early fairs in this undated old photo.



GOVERNOR HEBERT O'CONNOR pats a winner in the purebred bull judging in this undated photo, circa 1940.



CALVARYMEN from Fort Myers, Virginia, entertained with their maneuvers at the 1939 Fair.

*A special thanks to Mrs. Joseph B. Drury of La Plata, The Cooperative Extension Service,  
and Mitchell Digges for the loan of the old photographs used here.*