

## The Great Depression, Fires, Gypsies and Fairs A history of the North Carolina State Fair

### *Editor's Note:*

*The following is a story about Mr. Norman Chambliss, Sr. who was instrumental in the development and management of the North Carolina State Fair in Raleigh, fairs in Greensboro, Rocky Mount, Salisbury, Clinton, Tarboro and Greenville. Mr. Chambliss also played a major role in the formation of the North Carolina Association of Agricultural Fairs. His son, Norman Chambliss, Jr. and his grandson Norman Chambliss, III, still manage the Rocky Mount Fair today.*

*George Hamid, Jr., his son, Jim Hamid, Sr., and grandson, Jim Hamid, Jr., operate the Greensboro Fair which will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1998. It has run continuously at the same location since 1898. The Hamid family acquired the property in 1933. In 1957, the property was sold to the City of Greensboro for the current coliseum to be built, but maintained the right to have the Fair there.*

“Back in 1932, I got a call from Governor Ehringhaus asking me to come to Raleigh to talk about the State Fair. Because of the Depression, the Fair was losing money and the Governor thought the state needed to get out of the fair business. He wanted me to lease the fair and try to turn things around. I told him I didn't have the capital, but I would see what I could work out.”

Norman Chambliss, Jr. recalls his father's early days in the fair business with a fondness and appreciation only a son could have for his dad. As the manager and promoter of a very successful Rocky Mount Fair, Norman Chambliss, Sr. had contacts all over the country in the fair, midway and entertainment business. It was one of these contacts, Mr. George Hamid that Chambliss first approached when asked by Governor Ehringhaus to consider managing the State Fair.

“Hamid had a huge business and provided all our grandstand reviews and other acts for the Rocky Mount Fair,” Norman, Jr. said. “George Hamid came to America from Arabia to perform in the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. He later owned the best and most popular amusement business on the East coast. He had jugglers, acrobats and other types of entertainment. He even owned the Steel Pier in Atlantic City and the New Jersey State Fair.”

During his conversations with Hamid, the senior Chambliss approached Dr. Braswell, a local doctor and bank officer in Rocky Mount, and asked him to consider signing a personal bond that was required for Chambliss to lease the State Fair operation. The bank gladly provided the needed bond.

Hamid then came to Raleigh where he and Chambliss met with the appropriate state officials and worked out a lease agreement to begin running the North Carolina State Fair. They formed the North Carolina Fair Operating Company and were managing seven North Carolina fairs at that time, including fairs in Greensboro, Salisbury, Tarboro, Clinton, Williamston, Rocky Mount and, now, Raleigh. In George Hamid's 1950 biography, *Circus*, he describes some of the difficulties associated with their first North Carolina State Fair back in 1933. “We knew why the North Carolina [State] Fair had deteriorated so badly that it was almost called off. The whole fair had been turned into a gypsy camp, and every part of the midway was riddled with crookedness and corruption. The result- attendance had dropped until, the previous year [1932], the fair had lost thirty thousand dollars.”

Hamid went on to say the he and Chambliss met with officials from the Department of Agriculture and “every other important man connected with the State Fair” and told them what was wrong with the Fair and how to fix it. It was at this time that Hamid and Norman Chambliss, Sr. signed the lease to run the N.C. State Fair.

Not long before the 1933 State Fair opening, Hamid and Chambliss arrived at the fairgrounds only to find a dozen gypsy tents dotting the midway. The knew a somewhat uncooperative sheriff and his crooked

buddy the coroner had given them permission to camp, so they couldn't very well ask the sheriff's help in removing the gypsy camp from the fairgrounds. It seems the sheriff and coroner resented the fact that outsiders had been allowed to lease, run and manage the State Fair. Hamid and Chambliss gathered up some of the performers along with Max Linderman, who owned and operated the "World of Mirth Shows" – considered the finest carnival in America – to help remove the gypsies. "Obviously, I couldn't call on the law to evict the gypsies so we tossed them bodily off the lot," Hamid says in his book. "Max then told me that 15 of the worst left-handed 'lucky boys' in the business had set up wheels and dice right where he was supposed to put up his midway. Again, we found out this, too, was the sheriff's doing."

Hamid went on to say that, "We led Max's elephant, Ginger, out to the row of concessions, where I gave the thugs 15 minutes to clear out. Meeting only jeering defiance, I pronged Ginger and she demolished the first tent. The owner rushed at me, and I had to flatten him with my fist. The rest of them packed their belongings and fled."

With the gypsies and other problems now out of the way, the 1933 State Fair opened without further incident. By the close of business on Thursday, the receipts showed Hamid and Chambliss that they had met all of their expenses. "From here on in, it's gravy," Hamid said. In now seemed like Chambliss and Hamid had started turning things around for the N.C. State Fair.

That very night, however, they were awakened by a tremendous fire in the big exhibit building at the fairgrounds. The two main exhibit buildings stood end-to-end with a thirty-foot arch between them, eight feet above the ground. Beyond the second building stretched the tents, rides and shows of Max's midway. A lack of water pressure hindered the firefighters' efforts to extinguish the blaze. Everyone knew that if the fire jumped the arch between buildings one and two the whole State Fair would go up in smoke.

With very little time to try and break down the arch to prevent building two from catching fire, Hamid, Linderman and Chambliss once again decided to rely on Ginger the elephant for help. They attached one end of a huge chain to Ginger and the other to the arch connecting the two buildings. With a lot of coaxing and after several attempts, Ginger the elephant finally exerted enough force to bring down the arch in a roar of sparks.

"A cheer burst from the gathering of fireman, state troopers and carnies who had watched the whole thing. The fireman quickly dug a trench to halt the spread of the fire. After a while, the water pressure rose and by dawn Friday the fighters smothered the blaze," Hamid said. He said that the fire added to the general excitement surrounding the Fair which resulted in huge crowds on Friday.

During his work running the State Fair and six others, Norman Chambliss, Sr. was perhaps the biggest influence on promoting agriculture at these events. "Back in those days," recalls his son Norman, Jr., "any school, community or civic group could have a carnival and call it a fair. This concerned my dad greatly and he was very much interested in the agricultural part of all of these fairs and he worked hard to promote agriculture."

"He got the legislature to pass a law, and in order for your operation to be called a Fair you had to be approved and licensed by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture. He did this on his own because while in Raleigh he had developed a lot of close ties in the legislature. I can remember vividly how pleased he was when this law was passed," Norman, Jr. recalled. For these and other efforts, Norman Chambliss, Sr. is widely recognized as being instrumental in forming the North Carolina Association of Agriculture fairs. "He was obviously very active in the fair business and attended all the early fair association meetings, which were rotated between Durham and Raleigh in those days," Norman, Jr. said. Norman, Jr. also recalls spending summers with his dad in Greensboro while his father worked on plans for all the fairs. "During the daytime, I'd drive the car all around the race track and have a great time," Norman, Jr. remembers. "We'd go different places- Salisbury, Clinton and all around. He'd call on the local agricultural people-home demonstration folks, county agricultural folks, 4-H clubs and others, to get them interested in working on the agricultural parts of the fairs. He's go wide open for seven straight fairs in a row- how in the world he did it- I don't know."

Norman Chambliss, Sr., George Hamid and "World of Mirth" midway owner Mac Linderman helped bring the N.C. State Fair back from the brink of extinction during the 1930's. The late Governor W. Kerr Scott returned the State Fair to the management of the Department of Agriculture in 1937 when he took office as Commissioner of Agriculture. That year in excess of \$12,000 was paid out in educational exhibitor premiums, and by 1968 this figure had reached more the \$70,000. Currently, the figure exceeds \$160,000.

Dr. J.S. Dorton of Shelby was appointed manager of the new State Fair Division of the Department of Agriculture, in 1937. Immediately, the Fair was no longer a burden and showed a profit of more that \$8,000. The profits have increased yearly and have been turned back into improvements for buildings and grounds.

Beginning in 1933, Max Linderman and his "World of Mirth" show provided the midway and entertainment at the State Fair through 1941. During that time he only missed one year, 1938, when the Johnny J. Jones Shows were booked to provide the midway. The Fair, however, did not operate during the war (1942, 1943, 1944, 1945) but resumed in 1946. Mr. Linderman died in late 1944, so when the World of Mirth carnival returned, it was owned by Frank Bergen, Max Linderman's partner prior to his death. The World of Mirth last played at the 1947 State Fair. Beginning in 1948, Strates Shows began providing the midway at the State Fair. This same year, Banscom Lamar Lunsford brought the first Folk Festival, a feature that is still going strong. (Strates will celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the North Carolina State Fair this year.) The N.C. General Assembly approved funds in the late 1940's for construction of a year-round facility to serve agriculture, industry, commerce and the general welfare of the state. This center for educational, inspiration and recreational events was completed in 1952 and named the J. S. Dorton Arena. The arena's unique architectural design won it acclaim as one of the most significant structures of recent times.

Dr. Dorton died in 1961 and the State Agriculture Commissioner L.Y. Ballentine assumed his duties until death in 1964. It was in 1961 that the Fair operated six days for the first time. Robert W. Shoffner an assistant manager of the Fair for many years, completed production of the '64 Fair. At the request of then new Commissioner of Agriculture James A. Graham, Arthur K. Pitzer was named permanent manager in January 1965. Following Art Pitzer's retirement in 1983, Commissioner Graham appointed Sam G. Rand as State Fair Manager.

Sam Rand died suddenly of a heart attack two weeks prior to the opening of the 1997 Fair. Wesley V. Wyatt, assistant manager, was named acting manager for the duration of the Fair and was later promoted to permanent manger in November. Michael S. Pleasant, business manager of the Fair, was made assistant manager in February 1998. Under the guidance of Commissioner Graham, the N.C. Board of Agriculture, and professional management, the Fair continued to grow and today is considered one of the leading agricultural, industrial and educational fairs in the nation. In 1968, the Board of Agriculture approved extending the Fair's length to nine days beginning in 1969.

Five new structures were completed: The Gov. W. Kerr Scott Building (1972), Gov. James E. Holshouser, Jr. Building (1974), Jim Graham Building (1975), Forestry Resources Center (1976), and Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr. Horse Complex (1983). A new roof was put on Dorton Arena and an ambitious grounds improvement program of landscaping, paving, curbing and guttering was implemented. Work was also begun on Heritage Circle, an area near the fairground's lake set aside to highlight the cultural history of the state. One of the first Heritage Circle projects was an authentic 18<sup>th</sup> century schoolhouse donated in 1975.

Bids were accepted in 1998 for complete renovation of the education and commercial buildings back to the original drawings. This included Spanish tile roofs and ticket booths with lighted arches at gate entrances on those buildings.

Plans for the 1999 Fair include a waterfall on the northwest side of Dorton Arena. This waterfall will be a reminder of the original waterfall that stood where the administration building is now located. However, Hurricane Hazel in 1954 damaged the facility to the extent that it was torn down. An outstanding feature of that waterfall was that a portrait of the Governor of North Carolina hung on one column of the waterfall

and a portrait of the North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture was on the other column. The running water was lit at night with a duck and goose pound at the bottom of the waterfall.

Efforts to speak to the wishes of fairgoers paid off handsomely at the gate. Attendance averaged 570,000 in the 1970's and 615,000 in 1975, peaking at 759,000 in 1996. As of this printing, the record of highest attendance in one day occurred on October 25, 1997 with 136,939 visitors.