

# Rich History, Bright Future

# THE ALAMEDA COUNTY FAIR

## AT PLEASANTON

### TIMELINE

- 1858 Racetrack built by Don Refugio Bernal.
- 1902 The Golden Gate Fair was held on the site.
- 1904 The Pleasanton Fair and Races were inaugurated.
- 1912 The first modern Alameda County Fair was held in Pleasanton.
- 1933 California legalized pari-mutuel betting.
- 1939 Racing returned to the Alameda County Fair, with pari-mutuel wagering.
- 1941 The Alameda County Fair ran nine days of races, with a handle of \$432,644 – a national record. The fair was suspended for the next three years due to the war.
- 1963 The old wooden grandstand was torn down and the present concrete and steel one built.
- 1970s A period of expansion for the Alameda County Fair, during which time the addition of barns brought the stall total up to 700, and a 9-hole golf course was laid out in the infield.
- 1991 Pleasanton's Satellite Wagering Facility opened.
- 2007 The race meet set a new Fair record wagering handle – in excess of \$39.8 million.

By Mary Forney

One hundred fifty years ago a racetrack was built in Alisal, Alta California – the present-day city of Pleasanton.

It was 1858, just ten years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War, and eight years after California became the 31<sup>st</sup> state. Don Rufugio Bernal built the racetrack on a 64,000-acre rancho his family acquired in a Spanish Land Grant in 1839. It is the oldest continually operating track in California, and the oldest one-mile racetrack in America, surpassing the famous Saratoga track in New York by six years.

Since those early days, county fairs have been an integral part of California life, and horse racing an integral part of the fairs. Fair racing in California had its birth in Pleasanton, and the Alameda County Fair at Pleasanton has proudly preserved that rich tradition, while working toward a promising future.

Early Californians were well known for their horsemanship, and Bernal's racetrack was a central location for horsemen to gather on Sundays, to eat and drink, socialize, and see who had the fastest horse. The soil, climate, and the valley's famous red hay all contributed to the development of horse training and racing in Pleasanton. The sandy clay soil was ideal for the track surface, and the climate was the envy of eastern horsemen for year-round training. The track was sold in 1883 to Australian millionaire Monroe Salisbury, who operated it as Pleasanton Stock Farm, attracting eastern owners to send their horses west for early spring training. The track had various owners during the late 1800's and early 1900's, remaining privately owned until 1941, when it was purchased by the county.

Originally, Alameda County's agricultural fair was held in San Leandro, then later in Oakland and Hayward. Pleasanton's association with the fairs began in 1902 when the Golden Gate Fair was held on the site. In 1904 the Pleasanton Fair and Races were inaugurated, and the first Alameda County Fair as we have come to know it was held on the grounds in 1912.

Then and now, horse racing was and is at the heart of California's fairs. When pari-mutuel wagering was legalized in 1933, and horse racing in this State was established, authorizing law stated its purpose as the "encouragement of agriculture and breeding of horses," including a commitment for the continuous funding of California's fairs. With passage of that law, horses again began training regularly on the Pleasanton track; and in 1936, because other California tracks were too muddy for training, the great Seabiscuit trained at Pleasanton.

According to published reports, when racing returned to the Alameda County Fair in 1939, it brought in a pari-mutuel handle of \$19,800 for four days, and provided stabling for 360 horses, with purses totaling \$4,200. It was quite a show, complete with Vaudeville acts between the races!

Over the years, the changes continued. In 1941, a new grandstand seating 5,000 was built, as well as several new barns. That year the Fair had nine days



of racing and handle of \$432,644 – a national record for a meet of its size. Following the 1963 fair, the old wood grandstand was razed and the present-day reinforced concrete and steel structure was built with a seating capacity of 6,608. By 1970, additional horse barns were added, bringing the stall total up to 700. In the mid-1970's a nine-hole golf course was laid out in the infield. Pleasanton's satellite wagering facility opened in 1991. Built at a cost of over \$3 million dollars, the facility features early California mission-style architecture with over 30,000 square feet of indoor space and outdoor patios, and parking for 600 cars.

All in all, the Alameda County Fairgrounds occupies 267 scenic acres near the crossroads of Interstates 680 and 580, approximately 30 miles east of San Francisco. The site is green in more ways than one. Not only do the grounds feature gorgeous grassy areas and hundreds of trees, but the fair is the largest non-profit generator of solar energy in the nation – more than 1250 megawatts a year.

The Fair conducts a two week race meet each summer which, according to the California Horse Racing Board, is the most successful fair horse racing meet in Northern California. The 2007 race meet set a new Fair record for wagering handle – in excess of \$39.8 million. In 2008, it will conduct 11 days of racing – from June 25th through July 6th. As a year-round training center, Pleasanton has accounted for 10 to 14 percent of all annual “starts” at Bay Meadows and Golden Gate Fields.

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The Alameda County Fair at Pleasanton is poised to step into the void left by the impending closure of Bay Meadows. Its willingness to continue support of racing in Northern California will help to reshape the destiny of racing in the zone, but it will need assistance from the industry, and the help of owners in particular. To accomplish this goal, the industry needs to convey to legislators the importance of supporting legislative changes that will enable Pleasanton to operate more racing dates, and which guarantee the use of existing funds to help defray the cost of new, necessary construction.

Rick Pickering, chief executive officer of Alameda County Fair, noted that track management is studying the feasibility of installing a one-mile synthetic racing surface and 7/8-mile turf course, as well as modest reconfiguration of the grandstand in anticipation of picking up racing dates once Bay Meadows closes. “We’re looking at a variety of options,” said Pickering, “but you don’t have money unless you have dates.”

At a presentation to the California State Board of Food and Agriculture last August, Christopher Korby, executive director of California Authority of Racing Fairs (CARF) said, “We propose a model for the future of California racing that is at once practical, realistic, and familiar. We propose that racing facilities at fairs, which are publicly owned, expand and improve to fill the industry’s needs as privately owned, commercial racetracks are developed for purposes other than racing.”



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