

PIONEERS

2018 Pioneers Luncheon honors Pioneers & Supporters of the Montgomery County Agricultural Center and Fair with a special tribute to the Open & 4-H Rabbit Department and The Morris Family

Open & 4-H Rabbit Department

The first rabbit show at the 1949 Montgomery County Fair was actually a small 4-H Rabbit exhibit. But there was a lot of interest from open breeders who attended that first fair to sponsor an open class exhibit the following year. Harold Kirk organized the first open class show in 1950 and had 8 exhibitors and 32 rabbits that included New Zealand White, Chinchilla, Belgian Hare and Market Fryer classes. Horace Curtis, a breeder from Falls Church, VA, attended that first open class show, expressed an interest in helping and was named superintendent for 1951. He identified a local rabbit club, the National Capital Rabbit Breeders Association (NCRBA) that had experience sponsoring rabbit shows. They have skillfully sponsored this exhibit for the past 66 years.

The first year, NCRBA recruited 42 exhibitors and showed over 460 rabbits. There were so many entrees the following year that the rabbits were moved out of the concrete block building into a new building on Maple Street that they would share with the Poultry Exhibit for the next three years. In 1971 there were 81 exhibitors and 889 rabbits shown. The Barn was packed. Standout superintendents included: Thomas Thompson, L.C. Linder, Frank Dean, W.V. Carroll, Bill Stuart, Robert Ray, Calvin Wright, Chris Sanato, Charles Morris, Jim Fraser and Phil Anderson. Larry Zimmerman, superintendent from 1990-1998, used his engineering skills to optimize cooling techniques for the barn. Phil Osborne, Tom Poole and Jay Udovich have all carried on the superintendent tradition of improving barn management and the educational aspects of the exhibit. Barbara Gesswein, matriarch of the Rabbit Barn has been the show secretary since the 1980's, assisted by Sharon Zimmerman and Connie Blaine. Connie also led the celebrations for the Year to the Rabbit in 1994. Over the first decade of the fair, the number of 4-H exhibits remained pretty small. However, George Ankney arranged for the 4-H exhibits to be housed in the poultry barn. Breeds included New Zealand White, Silver Marten, Dutch.

In 1971 Robert Ray became co-superintended with Grant Olson and later the sole superintendent from 1976 to 1997. During his tenure, the number of participants and exhibits increased with a high of 238 rabbits shown in 1976. He accomplished these improvements with assistance from Cindy Ray, Shirley Young, Ernest Pries, Robert Minneman and Robert Royal. 4-H standouts for the Best Rabbit Display from 1963 to 1980 include Mason Powers, Joseph Kavanaugh, Carl Minnerman, Kenneth Ligon, James Conlan, Nancy Cottman, Stephen Ray, Gary and Geoffrey Young, David Gesswein, Melanie Priest, Janice Brinegar, and Tom Petro. Tom Fitzpatrick took over for Robert Ray in 1998 and has continued to foster an educational product. Dedicated 4-H club leaders including Connie Blaine, Francine Waters and Kyla Butts have nurtured the tradition of a very active 4-H Rabbit Exhibit. Many of our 4-Hers have gone on to win state, regional and national individual and team titles to include Kyla Fitzpatrick (ARBA Queen in 2002) and Liam O'Lone (ARBA King 2004).

Barn 22, "The Rabbit Barn", has become one of the "Main Attractions at the Fair". This has been a team effort between the NCRBA and the Montgomery County 4-H Rabbit Club. Many invaluable volunteers from both clubs have made this a product of many family and individual efforts including: Cindy and Robert Ray, Ed and Connie Blaine, Larry and Sharon Zimmerman, Dave and Karen McNally, Phil and Judy Osborn, Jacque and Sue Smith, Jay and Trish Udovich, Tom, Mary Jean and Nikki Poole, Margo, Jim and Joe Lehman, Susan Wilson, Grace Gesswein, Bette Conlon, Carla Allison, Mary Judge, Robin Keyser, and Mike Lazier. Take a few moments to walk through the aisles and enjoy the Rabbit Experience.

The Morris Family

Our family's involvement with the Ag Center traces back to Harold Morris, our father, grandfather and great-grandfather. He served as President in 1981. He was involved during the following ten years with the building committee and master & long-range planning committees. Harold's wife, Jean, generously donated money to purchase the tack room building at the horse arena. Michael also served on the Board of Directors, holding the offices of Vice President and President in 2002 and 2003, and was involved with building and grounds and security committees.

Cherie has volunteered with the Off-Season Food committee, Herdsmen's Breakfast committee, and the 4-H Livestock Sale committee. She was a Beef Club leader and helped initiate the Buyer's Social held during the Fair.

Chris has also been a Board member, currently serves as open Beef Co-Superintendent, is a member of the Livestock committee, volunteers with the Beef Club and the Livestock auction. Chris was a member of the 4-H Beef Club and the Sheep and Swine Club for eleven years. Chris' wife Emily, also a former 4-H'er, has served on the Off-Season Food committee and currently serves as the 4-H Food Preservation Chairperson.

Melanie was a member of the Beef Club and the Sheep and Swine Club for eleven years and has volunteered many hours in various departments along with her family. She was an original member of the 4-H Horse-n-Around Club and competed on the Horse Bowl team.

Chris and Emily's daughters, Kayleigh and Brooke, will also be future 4-H members, following in their mom and dad's footsteps, with Kayleigh completing her second year as a 4-H Clover animal club member.

A Little History

The Montgomery County Agricultural Center Inc. (MCAC) was formed as a privately operated 501(c)(3) non-profit organization on January 7, 1949, when a group of local farmers were elected as the first Board of Directors by the volunteer membership of the organization. The MCAC had recently purchased 64 acres of land adjacent to the railroad tracks from Herman Rabbitt, a successful farmer and landowner in Gaithersburg. On June 4th, 1949, hundreds of volunteers participated in after an old-fashioned barn raising and 12 outbuildings were constructed in one day. The site of the new Montgomery County Agricultural Center was created. Dedicated volunteers donated time, materials and talent to construct and continue operation of the Montgomery County Agricultural Fairgrounds. The Fairgrounds would not be what it is today if it were not for those visionary pioneers who were committed to agricultural education and family entertainment.

As is true today for the agricultural center, the volunteers were, and still are, necessary to the successful operation of the Fairgrounds, through continued contributions of materials and free labor for the construction of the new facilities, as well as upgrading the old. A network of more than 2,000 volunteers continue providing their time, making the agricultural center a vital part of the business community in Montgomery County. The nine day Montgomery County Agricultural Fair that is held in mid-August requires support from over 800 volunteers who assume the responsibility for organizing and producing the single largest annual event in Montgomery County. Thank you to all our pioneers who have helped make the Fair what it is today!

The Pioneers Luncheon is sponsored by: Montgomery County Agricultural Center, Inc.

The Montgomery County Fair officially opened in 1949. It was made possible by many volunteers, contributors, families, and government officials who, over the years continue to make the Fair a place for youth and others to gather and show results of their work, to enjoy camaraderie and to educate others about agriculture.