WLG 507

West Virginia University
EXTENSION SERVICE

West Virginia Fairs and Festivals

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Educational Objectives

1. Understand traditions, culture, and history of West Virginia fairs and festivals.
2. Increase geographic knowledge of event locations and connections to county economies.
3. Encourage group activities through visits and volunteer opportunities.

Traditional beginnings and farming roots

Like many of the foundations of modern society, the American version of fairs and festivals stems from our farming roots. Since the early 19th century, Americans have gathered for formally organized fairs to advance agricultural knowledge. Farm families could learn about new methods and equipment, as well as show off their best produce and livestock. The handiwork of the farm women was displayed through sewing, home arts, and baked or canned goods. Perhaps the most important consequence of these events was the strengthening of community bonds. The events gathered neighbors, friends, and relatives far and wide to share information, develop a sense of camaraderie, and instill local traditions.

Records show that the State Fair of West Virginia gradually developed from earlier community events throughout Greenbrier County. The earliest documentation indicates that the Greenbrier Agricultural Society started organizing an annual event in 1854. The Greenbrier Valley Industrial Exhibition, which was held in Alderson from 1883 to 1889, was the first fair in the county to incorporate demonstrations of new farming technology. Each year the organizers worked to improve these fairs by adding entertainment, contest categories, and infrastructure. The first Greenbrier Valley Fair was founded on March 19, 1921, by the local Shorthorn Association. The fair was held in August at the current site of the State Fair of West Virginia in what is now known as Fairlea, West Virginia.

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Twenty years to the day after it was founded, the importance and popularity of the fair was recognized by the state legislature. The legislature approved Chapter 19, Article 7, Section 9 of the West Virginia State Code, which recognizes the Greenbrier Valley Fair as the State Fair of West Virginia. Due to World War II, the event was cancelled from 1942 to 1945, which delayed the fair's name change until 1946.

This act of legislature probably was not welcomed news in Wheeling, where the first West Virginia State Fair was held. The Annual Fair and Stock Exhibition had been held on Wheeling Island since 1866. Starting in 1881, this event was the self-proclaimed West Virginia State Fair. Although the name of the event varied over the years, the fair was held through the mid-1900s. Unfortunately, the periodic flooding of Wheeling Island proved to be a factor with major floods occurring in 1936, 1937, and 1942.

The Mountain State Forest Festival, which started in 1930, is recognized as the oldest festival in West Virginia. The concept of the Forest Festival started after locals expressed interest in organizing a homecoming event. Setting the bar for community festivals, many of the time-honored traditions of the Forest Festival have been replicated. One of the most unique and treasured traditions is the coronation of Queen Silvia. The festival founders had the foresight to bring statewide attention to Randolph County by naming a royal court led by Queen Silvia. The queen and all 40 princesses in her court must be West Virginians who live outside of Randolph County.

Celebrate the fruits of labor

From the basic need to demonstrate and spread agricultural knowledge, West Virginia fairs and festivals have evolved into a celebration of fun, food, and holiday treats.

- One of the oldest festivals in the state is the Strawberry Festival, held the third week of May in Buckhannon, West Virginia. It is known as one of the largest festivals in West Virginia and celebrates the strawberry harvest. The festival began in 1936, as a way to promote the growth of strawberries in the area, as well as creating a place to sell berries. In 1943, the festival was not held due to World War II but was reestablished in 1949. Over time, the festival has grown from one day in 1936 to the five-day festival of today. From carnival rides to arts and crafts to entertainment, the West Virginia Strawberry Festival continues to offer a variety of family activities each May.
- In 1938, Preston County's annual Buckwheat Festival began. It occurs the last weekend of September in Kingwood. Buckwheat was chosen as the focus of an end-of-harvest homecoming, in part for its uniqueness and the thought that the grain might spur agricultural economic growth during the Depression. Even though the Buckwheat Festival now includes carnival rides, as opposed to sack races and husband-calling contests, the festival has always included king and queen contests, crop exhibits, and serving buckwheat cakes and sausage.

- Not all the festivals of fruits and vegetables commemorate the harvest in its edible form. In 1992, Ric Griffith turned his home in Kenova into an attraction. Each year, Griffith and other volunteers carve and display jack-o-lanterns around his house. In 2005, he had more than 3,000 of them – lining his porch, covering his roof, and many other parts of his Victorian home. This magical display is lit up 24 hours a day around Halloween and has been for the past 20 years.

Heritage and ethnicity bring people together

West Virginia has several festivals that recognize, not only its own distinct heritage, but the various ethnic groups that have claimed the state as their home. The Hatfield and McCoy and the West Virginia Black Heritage festivals are two examples that observe some of the state's rich heritage.

The Hatfield and McCoy Festival is a one-day event that commemorates the famous Hatfield-McCoy feud. The festival is held every June and features a marathon, free entertainment, ATV rides, and tours of the sites associated with the Hatfield-McCoy Feud. The goal of the West Virginia Black Heritage Festival is to celebrate the African-American experience and the milestones made since the Emancipation Proclamation. This family-friendly festival started in 1990 and is a four-day event held every Labor Day weekend in Clarksburg.

The state is also home to various ethnic festivals that celebrate food, culture, and music from Europe and the Middle East. Italian festivals lead the way with four that are held in Wheeling, Clarksburg, Fairmont, and Bluefield. All celebrate Italian culture through food, music, crafts, and entertainment.

The state also boasts two festivals that celebrate Scottish and Irish culture. The Scottish and Celtic Heritage Festival is a one-day event held in Parkersburg every April, whereas the Scottish Festival and Celtic Gathering is a three-day event held every May in Bridgeport. Both festivals feature Scottish and Irish dancing, music, bagpipes, and other Celtic activities and entertainment.

Two lesser known festivals include the St. Greek Festival in Huntington and the Mahrajan – a Lebanese festival held in Wheeling. The St. Greek Festival is a three-day event that offers visitors a chance to experience Greek music, dance, and traditional food and drinks. On the other hand, the Mahrajan is a one-day fundraising event for the state's only Maronite Catholic Church. The festival started in 1933 and features traditional Lebanese food, along with Middle Eastern music and dance performances.

Finally, Multifest celebrates the state's diversity through art, music, education, cultural programs, and cuisine. This event, held in early August at the State Capitol, features Latin and jazz music, R&B, gospel, Italian heritage presentations, and Eastern Indian dancers.

Cultural Festival	Time of Year	Location
Scottish and Celtic Heritage Festival	April	Parkersburg
Scottish Festival and Celtic Gathering	May	Bridgeport
St. George Greek Festival	July	Huntington
The Upper Ohio Valley Italian Heritage Festival	July	Wheeling
Mahrajan	August	Wheeling
Multifest	August	Charleston
The West Virginia Italian Heritage Festival	September	Clarksburg
West Virginia Black Heritage Festival	September	Clarksburg
The Southern West Virginia Italian Festival	October	Bluefield
Feast of the Seven Fishes	December	Fairmont

Festive fun

Group activities are an easy way to explore new places and try something different. Why not plan a trip to a neighboring county to visit a new festival? Healthy tips for visits include walking,

dancing, moving, or playing during fair activities. Bring a camera and have a group photo contest to document your group fun. Remember that fair food is tasty but often high in calories. Try sharing oversized portions with a friend.

Whether or not a trip is on the agenda, try a quick game with your group. Have participants engage in a brainstorming race. Write down as many responses as possible:

- List W.Va. fairs and festivals you've attended.
- List ways you have participated at fairs or festivals (worked, entered contests, etc.).
- What events would you like to visit?

References

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