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CONTACT: Matthew T. Reitzel, (605) 773-3615 or Matthew.Reitzel@state.sd.us

Early History of South Dakota State Fair documented

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota State Fair noted its 100th anniversary in Huron in 2005. The 1903 South Dakota legislature passed a bill to permanently move the fair to Huron. Prior to that, the State Fair witnessed its share of different locations and scandal, according to research by the South Dakota State Historical Society.

“It’s important to point out how the State Fair site was chosen,” said Matthew T. Reitzel, manuscript archivist for the South Dakota State Historical Society-Archives at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center. “Before 1905, towns throughout the state sent bids to a State Fair Board within the State Board of Agriculture to have their town hold the fair. In 1890, for example, Aberdeen paid \$1,700 to secure the State Fair. It appears a winning town would hold the fair for two years and then the bidding process would start over.”

Both the 1889 and 1890 State Fairs were held at Aberdeen. Each year saw attendance anywhere between 4,000 to 5,000 people. Some of the main attractions included grain, livestock, domestic exhibits, horse trotting and running, a tight rope walker and a balloon ascension.

Sioux Falls had the fair in 1891 and 1892. The 1891 fair ran for two days and saw 20,000 people attend. The 1892 fair was extended to four days with Tuesday being “Old Soldier’s Day.” Horse racing purses ran as high as \$1,000 with the average purse being \$500. Representatives of Clay County won \$300 for best agricultural exhibit in 1891. The State Fair then moved back to Aberdeen in 1893 and 1894.

Suspicion and scandal surrounded the State Fair of 1895. Sioux Falls won the right to hold the State Fair for six years. Their bid to the State Fair Board was to pay \$1,500 for the first year and \$1,000 each year after. Soon after the 1895 fair, the State Fair Board claimed insolvency, though the receipts for the 1895 fair totaled \$10,711.61.

“The board had only \$1,500 left after paying their expenses; however, they still had \$4,500 left to pay in premiums (award money given to exhibit winners),” Reitzel said. “Allegations of corruption quickly ensued as the State Fair Board was accused of defrauding the people of Sioux Falls and South Dakota.

“Newspapers throughout South Dakota noted the success of the State Fair in Sioux Falls,” Reitzel said, “but the State Board still fell short of paying all their expenses.”

The board was not found guilty of any wrong doing (although it was later determined that the State Fair Board was not an officially constituted body within the State Board of Agriculture and was itself a separate-private entity) and the city of Sioux Falls pulled its bid for the fair.

The following year (1896), Yankton garnered the rights to the State Fair after the Sioux Falls vs. State Fair Board boondoggle. The town gained the right to host the State Fair for nine years. The

State Fair Board had several conditions for the town of Yankton, including furnishing a 40-acre site near the railway station, guaranteeing payment of premiums for the first year, and paying all expenses of the State Fair Board.

“The State Fair Board learned its lesson from the Sioux Falls fiasco,” Reitzel said.

The State Fair was always noted as being “successful” but continued to have financial difficulties, even in Yankton. The local Yankton board which oversaw the operations of the fair was \$1,800 in debt by 1898, only two years after Yankton procured the fair. South Dakota towns still placed bids for the fair as the Yankton contract expired. In 1902, six cities made bids to host the 1905 State Fair.

As the end of the Yankton contract approached, public support grew for the South Dakota Legislature to have direct involvement with the State Fair, through laws and appropriations. The state legislature met every two years and the State Fair issue came up for debate in the 1903 Legislative session.

On Jan. 17, 1903, Sen. Fred M. Wilcox of Beadle County introduced a bill to have the State Fair moved permanently to Huron. Senate Bill 61 was reported favorably out of the Committee on State Affairs and reached the Senate floor for passage. The Senate passed the bill with a vote of 37 Senators for Huron to 6 against.

Leading opposition in the House arose from Rep. Titus E. Price of Yankton. His efforts were in vain, as the bill passed the House by a 2-to-1 margin and became law. The Appropriations Committee later passed a law to provide \$10,000 for the construction of permanent State Fair buildings in Huron.

In addition, the State Fair Board earlier that year awarded Huron with a 10-year contract to host the State Fair. Before the passage of the bill, the Chicago & Northwestern Railway Company made an offer to deed 85 acres of land for the State Fair, if the fair became permanently located in Huron.

The 1905 State Fair in Huron was deemed a success. Fair goers heard a dedication address by Gov. Samuel H. Elrod, along with other speeches given by Sen. Alfred B. Kittredge and Congressman Charles H. Burke. Reporters noted that “the buildings and grounds overflowed with humanity.” There were daily horse races and livestock parades along with the usual exhibits of cattle, horses, swine, sheep, buffalo, poultry and bees. There was also a group of Crow Creek American Indians in native dress that cooked, danced and lived in wigwams on the fair grounds. The total receipts for the 1905 fair were \$19,224.59.

In the third volume of his epic work on South Dakota history, George W. Kingsbury described six reasons for the State Fair’s failures before 1905: “1.) No fixed place 2.) Controlled by private individuals 3.) Local & not a statewide event 4.) Sioux City tried to kill it by fixing their fair on the same date 5.) Premiums offered not attractive to exhibitors 6.) Rivalry between the cities hurt the project.”

The State Fair from 1890 to 1905 saw good years and bad, failure and success. The fair was competing for patrons then as it is now.

“It’s important to remember that before coming to Huron, cities wanted to hold the fair and placed bids to have their city as the event location,” Reitzel said. “By 1903, state legislators and their constituents felt it necessary for the government of South Dakota to be directly involved with the State Fair. Even in its early days, the State Fair became a yearly institution in South Dakota, coveted by the larger towns in the state.”

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The South Dakota State Historical Society is an office of the Department of Tourism and State Development and strives to help the state meet the goals of the 2010 Initiative by enhancing history as a tool for economic development and cultural tourism. The society is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society’s world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.sdhistory.org for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.