

See You at the Fair!

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Historical Background

Suffragists campaigned for equal suffrage at state fairs from 1889 to 1914. Fairs were the perfect opportunity to reach big numbers of voters, but it could be hard to hold the crowd's attention ...

In September 1889, Emma DeVoe organized a number of men and women to speak on suffrage at the Beadle County fair in Huron. After the fair, they met to organize the first South Dakota Equal Suffrage Association. In 1890, DeVoe arranged big names like Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw to make speeches at the state fair grandstand – that year in Aberdeen. They had to be loud to be heard above the crowd. DeVoe also had a parade of bands and wagons bring the speakers from downtown to the fairgrounds.

In 1909 in Huron, the S.D. Votes for Women Campaign hung big suffrage banners over the doors of the Agriculture Building. Suffrage speeches were made each day at noon on the stair of the new Women's Building. After the fair, suffragists brought their materials straight to Mitchell for the Corn Palace festival -- another big-crowd event.

In 1913, the S.D. Universal Franchise League distributed their first issue of their *Messenger* newspaper at the state fair. In 1914, Antoinette Funk of Chicago joined state president Mamie Pyle at the fair. Funk described how “the grounds were covered with yellow banners. Every prize-winning animal, every racing sulky, automobile and motor cycle carried our pennants.” Workers at the suffrage booth made speeches and asked registered voters to sign petitions for suffrage. Funk also made open-air speeches on the street in downtown Huron to crowds in town for the fair.



H.S. Berlinger, South Dakota State Fair,
in SD Digital Archives, #2019-08-13-322.



Antoinette Funk

Forest City Press (SD).
March 6, 1914.

Your Turn!

Go to South Dakota Digital Archive's photo collection at: <https://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/> and search “Berlinger.” The results are stills from a 1912 film taken by Berlinger of the State Fair in Huron.

1. After looking through them all (or most), what surprises you most about how the fair used to look?
2. Pretend you're a suffragist. Write a one-page plan for how to attract the attention of the crowds and communicate your message. What events do you hold, what do you use for signs or banners (and where do you put them), and what slogans do you use?

If you have the opportunity to attend a county or state fair, observe two or more exhibits or exhibit booths for a political cause or candidate. What visual materials are they using? What slogans or text are part of their presentation? What methods are the workers using to communicate with people passing by and people that stop at their booth?