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THE CLOVERDALE FAIR:  
A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

Originally, fairs held in Surrey accurately reflected agriculture as the dominant industry and also the major social activities within the district. Since World War II, however, the Surrey fairs have failed to complement the changing world about them. Consequently, they have fallen into obsolescence. This paper will analyse the implications of Surrey's changing economic and social composition for the Lower Fraser Valley Exhibition.

The Advent of a Community Fair

By 1880, the previously subsistence nature of agriculture in the Lower Fraser Valley was responding to a growing domestic market. The development of the canning and lumbering industries and the construction of trunk roads to allow easier economic and social communications for the farmer stimulated the farming industry. It was during this agricultural expansion when the Surrey Agricultural Society was formed.

In 1888, during a Farmer's Institute meeting in the Surrey Town Hall, the Surrey Agricultural Society was formed to encourage the cultivation of land and the improvement of household arts. The first membership was composed of familiar names. Henry Thrift, the Society's secretary, arrived in Clover Valley during 1881 and, subsequently, became the local post master, clerk, collector and assessor, health officer and a member of the first school board.<sup>1</sup> One of the many directors was Thomas Shannon, a prominent farmer in the area. The executives' occupations allowed the Agricultural

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<sup>1</sup>G. Fern Treleaven, The Surrey Story, Vol. I (Surrey Museum and Historical Society, 1969), p. 43.

Society to become an integral part of the agricultural industry and local government.

On September 28, 1888, the first exhibition was held on the grounds surrounding the Town Hall at Surrey Center. The Fair involved most of the settlers in the district and was considered a major social event. Although the first Fair ended in a deficit, the amicable exhibitors accepted a reduction in the prize money and promised to return the following year.<sup>2</sup>

By 1891, the Surrey Fair was "...rapidly coming to the front as one of the best agricultural and dairying districts in the province."<sup>3</sup> A substantial increase of entries indicated the continuous expansion of agriculture in the area. Grains including hops, fall wheat and white oats, field produce including potatoes, turnips and dairy products were displayed. Thomas Shannon captured a majority of the prizes. From the domestic portion of the homesteads plants, flowers, cooking, fancy needle and knitted work were shown. The visitors included guests from New Westminster. While the patrons were watching the draught horse, poultry or swine competitions, they were entertained by the Artillery Band.

The 1896 Fair was held in the Odd Fellows Hall in Cloverdale. Again, the Daily Columbian reported an improved fair from the previous year. Entries exceeded the 1895 number by one hundred and Langley and Chilliwack were now represented. The Society's membership had increased and Vancouver and New Westminster provided \$200 for prizes. Exhibitors and patrons arrived by wagon, horse or bike, and a number of the New Westminster and Vancouver visitors arrived by the Great Northern Railway. Pony races, football matches, refreshment and ice-cream booths were present to entertain and serve the visitors.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup>Daily Columbian, September 21, 1891.

#### The Consequences of an Expanding Agricultural Market

In the years after 1900, Surrey changed radically. By 1900 it had a population of 2,000, and the lumbering, fishing and farming industries were expanding. Completion of the bridge across the Fraser River at New Westminster in 1904 allowed farmers easier access to large markets, particularly the Farmer's Market on New Westminster's Front Street. The completion of the British Columbia Electric Railway to Chilliwack in 1910 stimulated agriculture and caused a "real land boom" in Surrey.<sup>4</sup>

The Fair continued to improve during these years. The livestock shown often emulated the quality of stock at the provincial exhibition in New Westminster. And in 1910, Surrey won the Dewar Shield for the best agricultural district display. At the Fair Holsteins, Jerseys and Ayrshires dominated the cattle show while fifty magnificent draught horses and a variety of roadsters and saddlehorses competed for prizes. In 1910, attendance was first given to a school display. Rapid settlement and establishment of several schools allowed a large and interesting educational display. Attendance was increasing as patrons arrived from all areas of Surrey "...with their families to attend the fair and display a commendable enthusiasm."<sup>5</sup> The B.C.E.R. provided an electric car to carry visitors from New Westminster to the Surrey Fair. During this fair, the patrons were entertained by a baby show, a fat men's race and children's races.

Again in 1920 the British Columbian jocundly complimented the Fair as "...an outstanding success."<sup>6</sup> The Exhibition Hall built in 1912 with contributions from the provincial government, Surrey Council, the Agricultural Association's membership and the Surrey Farmer's Institute,<sup>7</sup> proved too

<sup>4</sup>G. Fern Treleaven, The Surrey Story, Vol. II (Surrey Museum and Historical Society, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>The British Columbian, September 28, 1910.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., September 22, 1920.

<sup>7</sup>The Surrey Leader, 1938.

small to accommodate the 1920 entries. An increase in the number of cultivated acres in the Lower Mainland had caused the number of entries to rise. The educational display allowed officials to note that "...the young of Surrey were progressing on the right lines."<sup>8</sup> Although poor weather had destroyed the grain crops that year, Surrey's successful Fair indicated the "...fine spirit of optimism and enterprise among Fraser Valley farmers."<sup>9</sup>

During these years, however, the racial prejudice in the community was also present at the fairs. The exclusion of Orientals from the Surrey Farmers' Institute virtually precluded their participation in the exhibitions. Consequently, the contribution of the Orientals to the market gardening industry has never been displayed at the Cloverdale Fair.

Soldier settlement in Surrey increased its population to 7,000 by 1927. During this period Surrey continued to supply the growing demand for primary products in Vancouver and New Westminster.<sup>10</sup>

"Bigger and Better only partially describes the thirty-eighth Surrey Fair."<sup>11</sup> Two thousand patrons attended in 1929 to see a 50 per cent increase in exhibits over the previous year. All sections of agricultural production and domestic arts and crafts competed for \$1,600 in prizes. Adults and children paying respective admissions of 50¢ and 25¢ saw tug-of-wars, horse shoe pitches and school sports. The two storey School Exhibit Building, constructed in 1924 by a Manual Training class, accommodated flowers, home products and a large school display. In this last year before the Depression, exhibitors competed for their district and not themselves "...on one of the most important days of the year."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>The British Columbian, September 22, 1920.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>G. I. Howell Jones, "The Urbanization of the Fraser Valley", in Lower Fraser Valley: Evolution of a Cultural Landscape, ed. by A. Siemens (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1968), p. 152.

<sup>11</sup>The Surrey Leader, September 11, 1929.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., October 2, 1929.

## The Depression and World War II

During the Depression expansion took place in the periphery of Vancouver. Inexpensive agricultural land and low taxes attracted many to Surrey for low-cost housing and subsistence farming. The population in Surrey had subsequently climbed to 13,240 by 1941.<sup>13</sup> The 1936 Fair entertained a record 2,500 people. Five complete columns in The Surrey Leader were required to report the Fair's myriad competitions. Exhibitors were attracted by the nominal 10¢ entry fee and the possibility of winning several dollars in prize money. During the Depression, the Fair offered an opportunity for the patron to enjoy a full day of continuous entertainment for a small admission charge. The visitor could enjoy side shows and games, the school display, or watch Henry Bose win extensively with his Holstein herd in the show ring. The Surrey Junior Band, a smiling Billy Blinkhorn and his equally jovial guitar, Highland dancing and the evening dance held in the Athletic Hall in Cloverdale were also available to entertain. However, financing the Fair was difficult during the thirties and exhibitors were asked to accept prize money paid on an eighty per cent pro rata basis.

By the mid-thirties, the acre-and-a-half lot of land at Surrey Centre was not large enough to accommodate the growing Fair. In 1936 Surrey Council purchased forty acres of land at Cloverdale for the new fairgrounds. Using the Municipality's International trucks, the Exhibition Hall and several barns were transported to the Cloverdale site and positioned in a natural meadow at the junction of the Pacific Highway and McLellan Road. In 1937, The Surrey Leader saw the move to Cloverdale as a "...vision of a greater municipal fair serving the entire Lowermainland and Fraser Valley; not one day but three, four or even a week—in short, a Lowermainland and Fraser

<sup>13</sup>Population, Planning Division, Corporation of the District of Surrey, August, 1962, p. 9.



Valley Exhibition." Revelling in further ebullience, the article said the "new vision" was complemented by fifty years of experience "...acquired on solid foundations of enterprise and success achieved by faith, confidence and enthusiasm for the future." Such ecstasies from the pages of The Surrey Leader have not been known to recent fairs.

The outbreak of World War II emasculated the local paper's optimism. Although The Surrey Leader allowed six columns to report the results of the 1940 Fair's various competitions, poor weather and the tragic events taking place on another continent reduced the Fair's exhibitors and visitors. The Surrey Leader used a meager one-third of a column to describe the activities of the Fair amid government advertisements to purchase war bonds "...to beat barbarism." The war deprived the fair of volunteers as many remained home to work, or were on their way overseas.

Events following the conclusion of the war had profound implications for Surrey. The completion of the Patullo Bridge in 1937 and the proliferation of the automobile during the opulent post-war years allowed rapid expansion in Surrey and Delta. The housing boom encouraged by N.H.A. loans attracted many young couples and families to Surrey. Their arrival helped increase the population in Surrey from 13,240 in 1941 to 29,729 in 1951.<sup>14</sup>

The Crest During the Early Fifties.

The farm sector continued to dominate the displays and activities at the 1950 Fair. The improving quality of cattle increased competition in the showing. Fifty Holstein cattle appeared at one fair during the fifties. The participation of light horses in saddle and breeding classes was also increasing. And 4-H dairy activity was intensified after the war. During this agricultural expansion, modern technology was appearing on the farms.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

As a result, at the 1950 Fair The Surrey Leader found "...more tractors in the machinery show than heavy horses on show."<sup>15</sup>

To attract Surrey's growing non-farm population, new features were included in the 1950 Fair. A striking full-page advertisement in the local newspaper announced a two-day fair involving grandstand shows, dances, a parade and prize car. Horse races and harness races took place before the grandstand while a dazzling midway and incandescent fireworks display enhanced the excitement. Daring Madison's Trapeze Act seventy-five feet above the grounds highlighted the 1950 Fair. The Surrey Leader reported the Fair in two sections and required two issues to list the competition results.<sup>16</sup> For the moment, the Cloverdale Fair had emulated the 1937 expectations of The Surrey Leader.

The Consequences of a Changing Community

Urban encroachment continued through the early fifties and intensified as the sixties approached. As the amount of vacant lower cost residential land decreased in Vancouver, people occupied the surrounding districts. Abundant low-cost land in Surrey attracted thousands. Consequently, Surrey's population increased to 70,838 by 1961.<sup>17</sup> However, from 1951 to 1961, the farm population in the Lower Fraser Valley declined from 39,615 to 27,022.<sup>18</sup>

TABLE I: POPULATION GROWTH IN SURREY, 1921—1961\*

1921	5,614
1931	7,888
1941	13,240
1951	29,729
1961	70,838

\*Source: Population, Surrey Planning Division, August, 1962.

<sup>15</sup> The Surrey Leader, September 21, 1950.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., September 21 and 28, 1950.

<sup>17</sup> Population, Planning Division, Corporation of the District of Surrey, August, 1962, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred H. Siemens, ed., Lower Fraser Valley: Evolution of a Cultural Landscape (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1968), p. 174.



Although farm population has decreased, farm production has increased. Farm specialization and sophisticated farming techniques have boosted production. For example, the production unit in the poultry industry has changed from a family operation involving 1,500 birds to a farm containing several massive barns which house thousands of birds.<sup>19</sup>

These trends have had severe implications for the annual Fair. The sponsor of the Fair, The Lower Fraser Valley Exhibition Association, has not altered the Fair's format to satisfy the entertainment demands of the contemporary patron. The automobile has allowed the population in Surrey to seek its entertainment across the Fraser River. The Fair's traditional and trite presentation of livestock shows, arts and crafts and talent similar to "Billy Blinkhorn and his guitar" simply cannot attract large numbers of people to the Fair today. Unfortunately, the Fair is locked in this position. The Exhibition Association, composed strictly of the agricultural community who do not wish to alter the traditional agrarian emphasis, will stagnate the Fair's future format.

In the show ring activity has deteriorated due to trends in the farming community. Specialization and sophistication have caused a decrease in the quantity and quality of farming entries. The modern farmer does not have time or reason to compete in an insignificant fair. Today, when the consumers do not choose from which farm they will purchase their farm produce, there is no need for the farmer to display his products. And when the farmer does compete, he is grooming his stock for the lucrative livestock show at the Pacific National Exhibition. The amicable competitive atmosphere of the past has now been replaced by professionalism.

In the few short years since the post-war population boom in Surrey,

<sup>19</sup>McKinnon, Stan. Interview with the author on October 4, 1971. Mr. McKinnon is the editor of The Surrey Leader and a member of the Lower Fraser Valley Exhibition Association.

the annual Cloverdale Fair has fallen from a highlight during the year to a point of insignificance. The advent of the automobile and television set has robbed the Fair of the enthusiasm of the volunteer, exhibitor and visitor. The era of the entire community gathering at the town hall for a festive social event has been replaced by a mobile and affluent society travelling great distances to attain their entertainment. The changing agricultural world has caused involvement in the Exhibition Association to decline. And the remaining Association members have failed to adjust their activities to complement the new world outside.

#### The Future Under Consideration

A meeting involving representatives of the farming and business community, general public and the municipal and provincial governments was held during September 1971 to discuss the fate of the Cloverdale Fair. Suggestions involving closing the Fair and changing it to something else, making the Fair a community event and emphasizing recreational and amusement aspects of the Fair were made.<sup>20</sup> The consensus of the meeting was that the Fair will have to change. Since the early sixties, increasing expenses and unsubstantial attendances have burdened the Exhibition Association with staggering deficits.

TABLE II: RECENT LOWER FRASER VALLEY EXHIBITION DEFICITS\*

1964	\$ 9,333.29
1965	12,649.37
1966	3,317.49
1967	7,525.20
1968	12,202.43
1969	20,942.20
1970	10,702.19
1971	13,231.51

\*Source: Annual Audit Statements, Lower Fraser Valley Exhibition Association.

<sup>20</sup>The Surrey Leader, October 7, 1971.

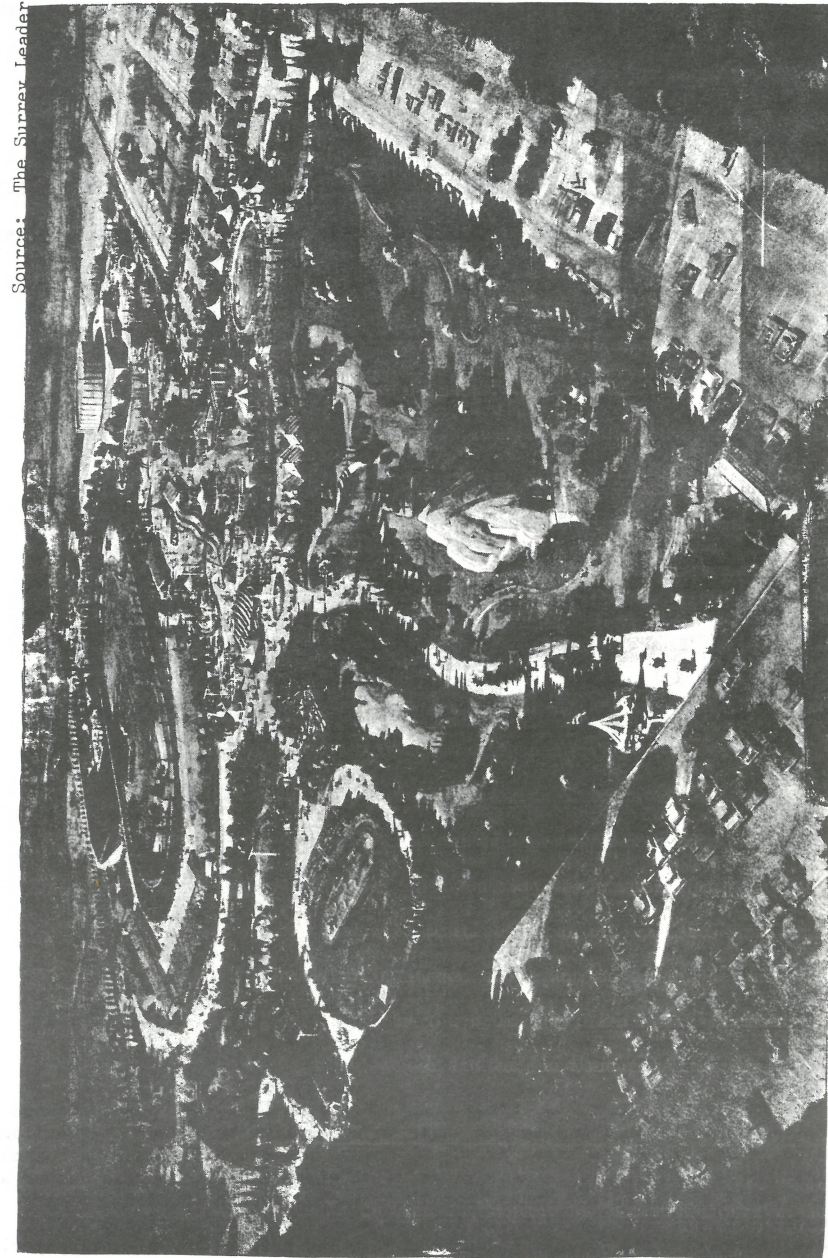
Professional proposals have been made. In September 1970, A Feasibility Study of the Lower Fraser Valley Exhibition Association and Fairgrounds was presented by Albert P. Morrow and Associates Ltd. to the Surrey Municipality. For \$11,000 this analysis firm presented a study stating the potential of the Cloverdale Fairgrounds. Considering Surrey's rapidly increasing population, Morrow proposed the landscaping and construction of a magnificent exposition. The facilities would include an arena, exhibit building, grandstand, barns, sports pool and light horse showing at a total cost of \$7.5 million.

At present, the Morrow proposals are not financially realistic. However, other more realistic proposals have been made. Combining the successful Trade Fair held on the grounds each November with the Fair would be an inexpensive method to attract several thousand people to Cloverdale. Unfortunately, the sponsors of the Trade Fair, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, believe a Trade Fair held in September would conflict with the commercial exhibits displayed at the P.N.E. Other proposals for the Fair include more commercial amusements and displays, a professional approach to management and more emphasis on artistic design. But these are only attempting to adopt the gargantuan features of the P.N.E. without adequate financial resources and without a guaranteed increase in attendance. If the Cloverdale Fair is to be a financial success it must provide the simple rural amenities that a larger exhibition cannot.

#### A Concluding Proposal

A continuation of the Cloverdale Fair must involve a one or two day event. It should eliminate all commercial displays and return to a typical country fair during Surrey's early years. The large horse and cattle shows could be held separately and on individual dates. The new Fair would

An Artist's Conception of the Morrow Report's Proposals (Looking Southwest from Lord Tweedsmuir)



Source: The Surrey Leader



include all 4-H activities. The flower, cooking, arts and crafts displays would also participate. The previous practice of spending large portions of money for unsuccessful entertainment features would no longer be tolerated. And who would come? People involved in the displays, their friends and possibly four or five thousand people exhausted by the P.N.E.'s redundant program. If this format is not accepted, quite conceivably the little country fair in Cloverdale will be engulfed by a changing economic and social environment and succumb to the cancerous urban sprawl.

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Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Mrs. Freda Gunst, Mr. John Lane, Mr. Stan McKinnon and Mr. J. T. Sullivan for donating their valuable time to answer my questions. Also, I would like to thank Mr. C. D. Grieve for his assistance in searching the Surrey Municipal files for relevant material and Mr. Douglas Hooser and his staff of the Surrey Museum for their assistance in locating primary material. And finally, I would like to acknowledge my instructor, Mrs. Jacqueline Gresko, for her guidance during the preparation of this paper.