

A HISTORY OF THE WAPPING FAIR

by

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who attended his first Wapping Fair in 1950

who exhibited for the first time at Wapping Fair in 1965

who started working on the Wapping Fair in 1969

and who still enjoys the Wapping Fair

The first Wapping Fair was held in 1892. It was sponsored by Wapping Grange and the proceeds were used to fund the Wapping District School. A fair was held every other year until 1932. By then the school districts were consolidated and profits from the fair were meager due to the depression, so no fair was held in 1934.

In 1945, as South Windsor approached its 100th anniversary, the Town asked each organization to do something to commemorate the centennial of the town. Wapping Grange decided to revive the Wapping Fair. In the late 1940s the fair was held at the community house in Wapping Center. As the fair grew it expanded into the Wapping Church, the end of Sullivan Avenue was closed the day of the fair and the doodlebugs pulled on the pavement. Eventually the State Highway Department would no longer allow the doodlebugs to pull on Sullivan Avenue because of the cost of repaving the road every year after the fair. A major event at the fair was the parade which included the doodlebugs and contests for the best decorated bicycles and doll carriages. Another major event was the public supper served Friday evening in the Community House. The ladies of the Grange were well known for their cooking skills and everyone looked forward to a delicious meal.

Around 1952 the Wapping Fair was held for one or two years at Hall's Grove which was located off Sullivan Avenue about opposite the present Town Hall. Access was difficult and the site not really suitable for a fair, so the fair returned to the Community House and Wapping Church. Sullivan Avenue was again closed to traffic, but the doodlebugs pulled at the old Wapping School which stood near where the South Windsor Library is today. The fair purchased two World War II surplus Navy tents which were used to house the vegetable and small animal exhibits. Larger animals were simply tied to trees. After dinner there was a dance in the Community House on Friday evening and the fair was held on Saturday.

By the mid 1960s traffic had increased to the point where it was no longer possible to close Sullivan Avenue, so the fair moved to the present Wapping School. Wapping Grange could no longer operate the fair alone, so they formed a partnership with the South Windsor Jaycees. The Grange dinner was replaced by a chicken barbeque. The Jaycees wanted to add a beer garden, but the Town would not allow this on school property. Since space was becoming tight on the school grounds anyway, they solved this problem by closing a section of Ayers Road and having the beer garden in a tent on the opposite side of the road in part of what is now Zagorski Park. When the Town was renovating the Wapping School for use as an annex to South Windsor High School the entire Wapping Fair moved across the road to Zagorski Park.

Two years later the Town developed Zagorski Park for midget football and a conflict developed

between the Wapping Fair schedule and the midget football schedule. To solve this problem the Town offered to lease Rye Street Park to the Wapping Fair. The fair was located where it is today, except there was only one baseball field and the fair used what is now the upper baseball field. Rye Street Park was an open field with no facilities, so everything had to be brought in. An old house trailer was donated for use as the fair office. It was not registered for travel on the roads, but with a police escort it moved anyway. Drinking water was provided in barrels borrowed from Stanley Waldron who used them in his tobacco fields. The area where the paved parking lot is today was a pit of very soft sand. Invariably a few cars got stuck in the sand and a tow truck was needed to get them out.

Sanitary facilities consisted of rented porta johns similar to the ones used today. One year the contractor supplying the porta johns had problems with his truck. Opening time came Friday night and the fair had no sanitary facilities. The Jaycees knew where two porta johns were sitting from an earlier event, so a crew was dispatched to bring those to Rye Street before the patrons in the beer tent had undue stress. The contractor arrived with his porta johns later than evening. Because of the delay, he agreed to maintain the porta johns the Jaycees had brought to the park for the weekend. When the contractor came to remove his porta johns he gave them all a final cleaning, but did not remove the ones the Jaycees had brought in because they did not belong to the contractor. The fair was gone for the year, but the porta johns remained. People using Rye Street Park found the porta johns convenient and before winter they desperately needed another cleaning. The Town was convinced there should be porta johns at the park at all times.

By the early 1970s Wapping Grange wanted to give up its interest in Wapping Fair completely. The Jaycees could not sponsor and manage the fair alone, so they formed a partnership with the Knights of Columbus. They contracted with the Eastern Star to manage the agricultural and livestock exhibits. A few years later the Jaycee organization folded and the Knights of Columbus sponsored the fair alone for two years. Long hours and meager profits took their toll and the Knights of Columbus voted to discontinue the Wapping Fair.

A meeting was held to pay all outstanding bills and wrap up the final business of the Wapping Fair. Mayor John Mitchell attended the meeting and gave those assembled a pep talk on why the Wapping Fair should continue. A group of about ten people decided they wanted Wapping Fair to continue, with or without the support of any other organization. After all the bills from the previous fair were paid they had a little over \$1500 to organize a fair that would have obligations of \$22,000 by the opening day. They knew the ten of them could not do all the work, so they approached several organizations in which they were members and asked for support. The Knights of Columbus, the Eastern Star and the South Windsor Lions each pledged \$500 and manpower. Three other groups could not pledge money but did pledge manpower. The Wapping Fair continued.

In 1976 the South Windsor Historical Commission wanted to celebrate the bicentennial of the United States and approached Wapping Fair to see what could be done. The fair agreed to provide space and a tent so the historical society could display part of their collection. Then someone suggested a tour of the historic homes along Main Street. Collins Bus Service agreed to provide buses and ladies from the historical society in period costumes narrated tours.

1988 was the 350th anniversary of the founding of the Connecticut colony. The State asked each town to do something to celebrate the anniversary and provided funds to help with the event. The

Town Council decided to have South Windsor's event as part of the Wapping Fair and offered to pay for fireworks. All was going smoothly until the night the Town Council was to vote on the agreement with the Wapping Fair Association. The town attorney was concerned that because the fair was sponsored by two religious groups there could be a question of the Town supporting these religious organizations. The Knights of Columbus and the Eastern Star both said they were not churches and therefore were not religious organizations. A recess was called and representatives from the Knights of Columbus and the Eastern Star met outside with the town attorney. One of them asked the attorney what was his definition of a religious organization. The attorney thought about this for a minute and then replied that in his opinion any group that opened every meeting with a prayer was a religious organization. A fair member asked, "Like the Town Council did tonight?" The Fair got the money for the fireworks.

Animals have always been an important part of every Wapping Fair, but sometimes you get more than you bargain for. One night the security crew found a skunk in one of the exhibit tents. Naturally they wanted to get rid of the skunk without the skunk spraying. Skunks do not like bright light and the security crew found that by shining flashlights towards the skunk they could herd him out of the tent and eventually into the nearby woods. Evidently the skunk did not like the Wapping Fair because he never returned.

In 1992 Wapping Fair held its 100th anniversary fair. Financially it was the most successful fair in many years. But the sponsoring organizations were tired and wanted to get out. The Wapping Fair Association bought out the financial interests of the three sponsoring groups and for the first time in its history the Wapping Fair became a completely independent organization.

Despite all these changes in sponsorship and management, the same ten people were the backbone of the fair. They were getting older and getting tired. Some of them could no longer do the physical work they had done years before. A new Jaycee chapter had formed in South Windsor and they agreed to take over the agricultural and livestock exhibits. This arrangement continued until 2001 when the older group wanted to completely retire from the fair. The Jaycees were ready, willing and able. It was time to pass the Wapping Fair on to the next generation.

The Jaycees made many changes to the Wapping Fair. They kept the best of the old, but added several new attractions and exhibits. In their first year the Jaycees held the most successful Wapping Fair ever. The next year they added enough exhibits to require a second tent to house all the livestock. With a year's experience under their belt they produced a larger and better Wapping Fair. They have continued to build on their success and now proudly present for your education and entertainment, the 2003 Wapping Fair.