



Inducted: 2009

As General Manager of the Western Fair Association from 1957 to 1992, Evan's unfailing perception, courage and initiative to advance new ideas along with his reputation for demanding high standards of integrity and accountability in all aspects of the fair and exhibition industry earned him the respect of his peers, the community, governments, industry organizations and associations across North America. Working with industry leaders and government agencies, he was actively involved with the formation of the modern-day harness racing industry and successfully introduced the first extended night harness racing in Ontario at the WFA in 1961. Harness racing, now the third largest provincial agricultural industry has a significant impact on the rural economy.

### **EVAN D. MCGUGAN**

1925-

Born on the family farm on Lot 3, Concession 3, Township of Ekfrid, in December of 1925 Evan received his early education in London before attending the Ontario Agricultural college. Immediately following his graduation he joined Western Fair Association as Secretary in 1948. That year marked the renaissance of the fair after an eight-year hiatus, when the grounds and buildings had been occupied by the Department of National Defence during World War II. He became Assistant Manager in 1952, and General Manager in 1957, a position he held until his retirement on January 31, 1991.

Evan's early years at Western Fair were occupied working with a small but dedicated staff to tackle the task of rebuilding and rehabilitating the fairgrounds. Building materials, stabling supplies and money were scarce, but by 1949 most of the army's temporary structures had been removed and the remaining buildings at Queens Park had been re-wired, refurbished and repainted. Contractors finished extensive renovations to the Ontario Arena and saw the completion of the two-storey livestock building which could accommodate 700 head of cattle on the ground floor and 400 horses upstairs.

Under young Evan's leadership, management and staff at Western Fair quickly earned a well-deserved reputation for innovation and teamwork. As a result, numerous groups were encouraged to choose the Association's facilities and buildings for horse shows, livestock shows and sales, social and cultural events, banquets and numerous other events. Within ten years of reclaiming the grounds from the military, Western Fair reported year-round use of its grounds. The increased trade and tourism business led to an expanded management, sales, operations and maintenance staff and provided a welcome boost to the economy.

The fairgrounds facilities included a half-mile race-track and a grandstand, used mainly during the annual fair. Although the “matinee” style of horse racing had been part of fair-time programs since the late 1800’s, it wasn’t until 1952 that three days of racing with “book betting” were conducted at the racetrack as part of the City of London’s anniversary celebration.

Then, as now, new ideas were not always popular, and there were the usual doubters and naysayer’s who eagerly voiced their opinions about the certain failure of such an undertaking. Nevertheless, with what was to become recognized as characteristic of Evan’s willingness to challenge the status quo, he convinced a handful of believers of the potential for a program of harness racing that would offer public wagering. He studied volumes of pari-mutuel rules and regulations, learned about the equipment and facilities needed and sifted through the public archives for racing charters. There were countless meetings with the federal Department of Agriculture and the provincial government before the next experiment, when pari-mutuel equipment was introduced for the first time at the 1960 Western Fair.

The three-day racing program was not without challenges. The difficulty of synchronizing the betting cycle and the starter and the need to manually calculate and cross-balance each betting pool before the prices were posted resulted in long delays. A negative chorus of “experts” proclaimed that pari-mutuel racing couldn’t be conducted at night, nor on a half-mile track, gambling was unwholesome, and no one would come anyway, but Western Fair Raceway introduced the first extended night harness racing in Ontario in May, 1961. The Association’s success in securing provincial approval for racing under the lights paved the way for the Ontario Jockey Club to follow with their first night-time racing meet at Old Woodbine in Toronto.

Over the ensuing years, the Western Fair Raceway operation provided both an incubator and a stepping-stone for many world-class drivers and horses. There have been good years and bad years, however, horse racing is now the third-largest agricultural industry in Ontario (next to beef and dairy) with complex links to the rural economy. The Ontario Racing Commission recently reported that about \$1.3 billion in wages and salaries are sustained annually by the total expenditures of the horse racing and breeding industries, providing some 37,000 permanent jobs and involving an additional 25,000 people on a part-time or unpaid basis. It all began because Evan McGugan saw an opportunity.

Throughout his tenure at the Western Fair, Evan was instrumental in making changes to a number of programs and procedures as they related to breed displays and judging. In 1965, with the guidance and input of leading agriculturalists and breed associations, the Canadian Department of Agriculture and representatives of the fair and exhibition industry, he led in proposing a revolutionary method of judging livestock. Instead of the long-accepted method of “eye-balling” an animal and assessing only its conformation, judges were now required to take into account performance records, breeding and production. Such radical thinking met with resistance from the more traditional exhibitors, but in the end the new Hays System (named after Harry Hays, then Minister of Agriculture for Canada) led to improvements in overall quality, production and profits.

Evan also introduced non-traditional livestock display methods, encouraging urban and non-producing patrons to learn about agriculture in a new and interactive way. He believed strongly that the Association’s responsibility as an agricultural society was to tell a meaningful story of the food industry in an attempt to bring the producer and consumer closer. So, for the first time, exhibitors displayed selected breed specimens

for the duration of the fair and the animals were arranged so they faced the public. Easy-to-read signs providing information on each specimen, together with their individual production and breed statistics were displayed for each animal. An operating milking parlour, complete with an audience area, was installed in the livestock pavilion, and classes of school children and city folk were invited to visit the fair and learn about the source of their food. This ground-breaking program was successfully adopted by fairs and exhibitions across the continent.

Evan's courage and resourcefulness were instrumental in Western Fair's introduction of the first "Genetic Focus" to beef cattle shows in the experimental program known as "Livestock 2000", which entailed the addition of measurable genetic structures to the scoring system. This innovation drew criticism from traditionalists, of course, but the changes encouraged participating herdsman to adopt enhanced breeding techniques and so further improve the quality of livestock. The project won the prestigious Louis S. Merrill Award presented by California-based Western Fairs Association in recognition of fair programs demonstrating leadership, vision and excellence.

Evan has participated as a panel-member and speaker at the Canadian Association of Fairs and Exhibitions, Western Fairs Association in California and the International Association of Fairs and Expositions. He has served as a director of all three organizations, was twice President of the Canadian Association of Fairs and Exhibitions and an Honorary Life Member of the I.A.F.E. He is also the only person ever to have received the highest honour awards from all three associations

Much credit is also due for his leadership and contribution in the development of the Standards for the Care and Safety of Animals, Health Standards for Outdoor Food Concessions, Canadian Safety Code for Amusement Rides, the independently contracted carnival, and the universal midway coupon system.

He is a past president of the London Chamber of Commerce and the London Advertising and Sales Club, a member of the board of stewards of Metropolitan United Church, past president of the Forest City Kiwanis Club, a recipient of the Kiwanis Legion of Honour Award on two separate occasions, and the Mel Osborne Fellowship, the highest award that a Canadian Kiwanis Club can bestow upon a member.

As busy as he was and still is, Evan, always made time for his extended family –Marnie, Peter, Liz and Joseph. He also has 3 grandchildren.

Evan McGugan is a man whose belief that his audience should always come first is guided by his high standards of integrity, accountability and service. His example will serve well those of us who follow his lead. He is most worthy of a place in the Middlesex County Agricultural Hall of Fame.