

Eleanor Neubert: Shepherding the Fair through the Years

By Lucy Grinnan

It's likely that no one alive knows quite as much about the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Fair and Livestock Show as Eleanor Neubert. She managed the Fair from 1984 to 2017, guiding the event through many major transitions, including the move from Grange Hall to our current site on Panhandle Road. Neubert prefers to avoid the spotlight—a brief time in the ring in the Fair horse show as a kid made that clear to her—but agreed to share some memories of the Fair through the years.

Neubert was born into a West Tisbury dairy farming family and grew up playing in barns and on tractors on the island at Flat Point Farm. Her father Arnold Sr. helped organize the Martha's Vineyard Cooperative Dairy after WWII and was involved with the Agricultural Society even before the arrival of the rides.

Today, the same land her father farmed is carefully stewarded by the family. Eleanor and her brother Arnie Jr. raise and sell beef, lamb, pork, eggs, and hay under the title of Flat Point Farm, and her niece Emily Fischer raises goats and makes goat milk soap to sell under the same name. Lydia Fischer, her first cousin once removed, also farms vegetables, flowers, and herbs on the property under the name of The Garden Farm.

As a kid, Neubert would count down the days until the Fair, excitedly crossing off every day in August on a calendar. On the first day of the Fair, she would rise at dawn to milk the cows and bring them over to the old Agricultural Hall (aka Grange Hall) for judging, then bring them home at 3 PM to milk, falling asleep at night to the Fair music wafting over her bed. As Neubert and her sisters grew older, Neubert's father built each of them a small plot to farm, and she entered her vegetables annually—in addition to the calf she raised as a 4-H project.

As she entered high school and college, she became focused on other things; she received a Bachelor's of Education in New Hampshire, taught for five years on Cape Cod, and worked in a Mexican restaurant in California before



© 2012 M... S & Alan Brigish, www.brigish

Eleanor at the Fair. Photo processed by Alan Brigish. returning to the Island to teach at the Chilmark School.

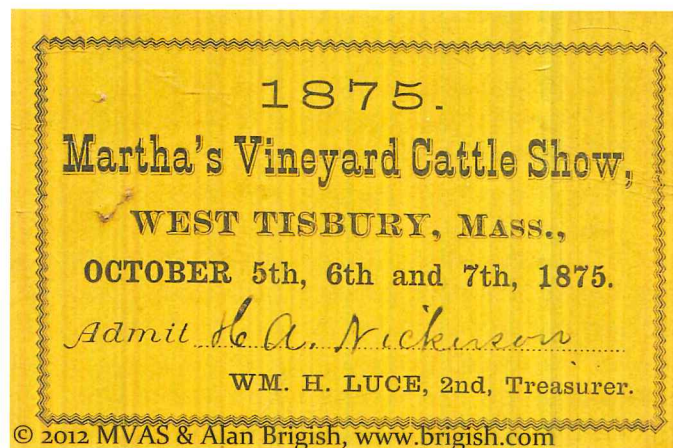
All roads lead to the Fair, though, so in 1984, she was reluctantly recruited as Fair Manager, assembling a committee of friends and learning the ropes. After each of her first three years in the position, Neubert declared that she was never doing that again; still, she returned year after year to plan the Fair with her ever-expanding committee.

Every year for 34 years, she diligently answered the lines of people with questions and ensured smooth communication between the many people who make the Fair possible. She remembers it all—including a visit by former President Bill Clinton and his daughter Chelsea. Neubert can even tell you how she handled it (closed the Hall to new visitors and watched from a respectful distance) and what they ate (an ice cream from the Island Children's School booth and a hamburger from the firemen's booth).

After years of organizing the Fair at the Grange Hall, the Agricultural Society trustees began looking for a new space—the 4-acre site was crowded and tight, and parking was nearly impossible. In 1993, the Agricultural Society purchased 21 acres from the Woods family under an agricultural property restriction.

After much debate about what kind of barn to build at the new site—a less expensive, easy to build metal barn or a more traditional wood one—the community decided to deconstruct

an old dairy barn in Woodsville, New Hampshire and rebuild it on the Island with the help of hundreds of volunteer “barnraisers.” This began a new phase in Fair history.



A ticket to the 1875 Fair in the MV Museum collection.

The first three years of the Fair at the “New Ag Hall” were chaotic to say the least. 1995 was a “dust bowl” with “howling wind,” and in 1996, the on-site water failed its test. In 1997, a storm with gale-force winds the night before the Fair opened dumped so much rain that someone jokingly placed a rowboat with oars in the new “pond” next to Panhandle Road.

However, after things settled into a rhythm—and a fourth day, Sunday, was added—the Fair began to flourish in its new home, with space for a fiber tent and more music, new events like the skillet toss and tractor pull, and even a rotating crew of new and exciting attractions: Lucky Bob, Robinson’s racing pigs, Gus BenDavid’s World of Reptiles.

Asked about her favorite part of the Fair, Neubert described looking out the windows from the office on Thursday, announcing over the loudspeaker “The Fair is now open. Please come in and enjoy yourself. We are starting the judging of the goats down at the Animal Barn.” She described watching the many kids of Fair committee members fall asleep late at night in the office or on the porch, and then grow up and become volunteers themselves. She described watching the crowds gather, and feeling proud to offer education, fun, and a little something for everybody.

After 161 years, the Fair persists thanks to the hard work of people like Eleanor Neubert: “It has kept its smallness. It’s still an old-fashioned country fair serving the year-round and seasonal community.”

Paul Jackson: A Gift of Growth

Excerpted from a piece by Linsey Lee

For many people, the high point of the Vineyard year is the August Agricultural Fair in West Tisbury. And the high point of the Fair—if you were lucky enough to be in the Hall setting up a display—was to watch Paul Jackson come in with huge armloads and bucket loads of brilliantly colored flowers and glistening vegetables of all sizes and shapes. In his lifetime, he earned an entire wall of blue ribbons.

Paul Jackson, a seventh-generation Islander, was devoted to his garden and creating the best soil for nurturing the healthy, beautiful, and delicious fruits, vegetables, and flowers in a sustainable way. Paul’s gift to the Martha’s Vineyard Agricultural Society of his one-acre farm and his house epitomizes his generosity—and his determination that his oasis of beauty and healthy living be continued and improved upon into the future by farmers and gardeners new and old.



Paul Jackson with some of his many Ag Fair ribbons. Photo shared by his daughter Beverly Bergeron.

From the sand, Paul created garden beds of light, fluffy and rich soil, into which one can easily stick their arm up to the elbow. Paul amended his soil with horse manure—four to ten tons a year that he has let rot for at least two years before he plows it in—and newly shucked scallop shells: “I pile them up around my apple and fruit trees because all the guts and everything rotten, they wash down through the ground to feed the trees. And then when they’re finished with that, then they go to make the driveway.” As the shells are crushed, their calcium wafts over the gardens and neutralizes the acid in the soil.