

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 11, 2009

The Harrington Raceway and the Delaware State Fair: In the southwestern part of Kent County, Delaware, on 300 acres just south of the town of Harrington, lies the Harrington Fairgrounds, home of the annual Delaware State Fair. The property was granted a Casino license several years ago to compete with Delaware Park (between Wilmington and Newark) and Dover Downs, the only other casinos in the state. Harrington has been in the headlines the past few days, as the General Assembly in Dover passed a bill, pushed by Governor Jack Markell, allowing sports betting all over the state. The Harrington people say it will drastically affect their gambling revenues and make it impossible to break even. The State Fair, a not-for-profit corporation, owns a controlling share in the whole thing.

I must tread lightly as I'm not a farmer, and the above is what I've read in our local newspaper. Delaware still has a large community of farmers south of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal (which crosses the state about 15 miles south of Wilmington), covering 90% of the state's area. To most of them the annual State Fair is a social highlight (and a lot of hard work), not only for the many competitions but for visiting and living with friends who share a common bond. It runs for a full eight days in late July and usually is marked by extremely hot weather.

Back in the 1930s, the harvesting of fruits and vegetables was big business in downstate Delaware. Before the advent of frozen foods, all the "big people," such as Heinz, Campbell, and Libby, McNeill & Libby, operated large canneries, along with famous local ones, such as Richardson & Robbins of Dover and Cannon Brands of Bridgeville. Chickens were raised in large quantity, perhaps first by John G. Townsend of Selbyville, long pre-dating Frank Perdue and Tyson. Peaches were a major crop in the 1920s and '30s. At the Nassau Orchards, less than 10 miles from Rehoboth Beach, you could pick your own off the ground for 15 cents per basket or buy baskets picked from the trees for 35 cents. A peach basket was ½ bushel.

In the 1930s, the fair at Harrington was advertised as the Kent-Sussex Fair and took place in late July as at present. At that time, there was a harness track, and racing took place on a fairly regular basis during the warm-weather months. After World War II, it became the Delaware State Fair. The track and harness racing are still there, but the investment in permanent buildings and the total acreage covered are much greater than 70 years ago.

There were two traps ("fields") on the fairgrounds for trapshooting during late fall, winter, and early spring. Since the shot fell close to the track, this was discontinued during the racing season. About mid-April, the final trapshoot, or club championship, of the year was held on a weekday. When I was secretary-treasurer of the Delaware State Trapshooting Association (1941–1950 except for wartime service), we promoted this event as the Kent County Championship. Since it was held on a weekday, the attendance was not large, but shooters from all over were encouraged to come, and the two times I went in the late 1940s, about 10 from northern Delaware attended and shot the 50-target program, plus perhaps 15 from Kent County who were eligible to compete for their county championship. It was often won by one of the Simpson brothers of Harrington. As darkness came, the women's auxiliary of the Harrington Fire Company put on a delicious home-cooked turkey dinner with all the trimmings for \$1.25.