



History of the Riverside County Fair & National Date Festival

The Riverside County Fair & National Date Festival is located in Indio, California, an oasis situated in the vast California desert, approximately 130 miles east from Los Angeles. The Fair started as a festival to celebrate the end of the annual date harvest in the desert region, the major commercial date-producing area in the western hemisphere.

Dates were an unknown commodity in the desert until 1903 when date palms were transplanted there from Algeria. By the early 1920's enough acreage was planted to make dates a major crop for the area. Date groves in the Coachella Valley were and still are such a novelty that they became quite a tourist attraction.

With the popularity of the date gardens the idea was planted for the first Date Festival in 1921 to be held in Indio's city park. A second Festival was held the following year and then enthusiasm drifted off and the idea of an annual Date Festival died.

It wasn't until 16 years later that the idea came forth again and the third Date Festival was held this time under the name of the Riverside County Fair and the Coachella Valley Date Festival, run by the Indio Civic Club, under contract from the County Board of Supervisors.

That year there were 72 booths exhibited and attendance reached 5,000. It was also the first year the street parade was staged. In 1936 Western themes were in style and the Fair took on a Western theme complete with wiskerenos, cowboy hats, and rodeo events.

In 1940 the County bought the present fairgrounds. The County purchased 40 acres for \$10,000. Years later the grounds were expanded with the purchase of an additional 40 acres including the date grove on the fairgrounds. When all totaled, the fairgrounds now cover 120 acres.

When World War II started all fairs in California were halted. When the War ended, Robert M.C. Fullenwider was hired to manage the Riverside County Fair & National Date Festival. Fullenwider envisioned an "Arabian Nights" theme tying in with the desert region and date industry.

During the early years, buildings with an Arabic motif were constructed and within two years an Arabian Nights Pageant, Queen Scheherazade contest, National Horse Show and an expanded gem and mineral show were added.

Although many local people came forth to donate their time to the Fair, there were two individuals that made outstanding contributions – Louise Dardenelle, writer/artist, and Harry Oliver, a retired motion picture set designer. Both were intrigued with the Arabian Nights theme and Miss Dardenelle conceived the idea for the first Arabian Nights Pageant and wrote the first script before she died in 1947. The late Harry Oliver designed and supervised construction of the Fair's outdoor stage.

In 1964 Fullenwider retired as manager and was succeeded by Charles Wameling who had been his assistant for the three preceding years. The Arabian theme grew under the leadership of Wameling who still wanted to keep the mood of a county fair. In keeping with that idea, the date, citrus and community feature exhibits continued to grow.

Charles Wameling retired in 1980 and Tom Ringhofer was hired to manage and guide the Fair into the 1980's. Mr. Ringhofer strove to keep the traditions going from years past, booking note-worthy talent as well as keeping the illusion of fantasy connected with the Fair in tact.

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