

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

August 15-20, 2023
Owatonna, MN

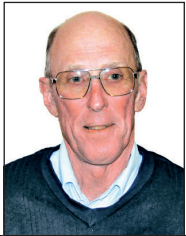
SCFF
Steele County Free Fair



A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT TO THE STEELE COUNTY TIMES • AUG. 9, 2023

A MESSAGE FROM THE FAIR PRESIDENT

Here's our promise: Satisfaction Guaranteed



DAN DEML

The Steele County Free Fair Board and Staff are eager to welcome you to "Satisfaction Guaranteed in 2023!"

The fair officially opens at 5 p.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 15. Plan to join us in Fair

Square Park where we will welcome Owatonna-born D-Day veteran and Tik-Tok star, 100-year-old U.S. veteran SSgt. Jake M. Larson, known to his fans as Papa Jake, as an honored guest. Papa Jake will participate in the flag raising ceremony and will be here throughout the week to visit with guests and enjoy the fair.

As our name says, the Steele County Free Fair offers a plethora of free entertainment, events and exhibits for fairgoers of all ages to enjoy. Be sure

to check out the entertainment on the United Prairie Bank Stage in Fair Square Park, the Elmer Reseland Stage in KRFO Town Square and the Village Square Stage in the Village of Yesteryear. These stages will feature everything from magic with the Moogician, The Electrifying Magic of Jay Mattioli and Greg the Great, to demonstrations by the Owatonna High School Robotics Team, to many genres of music and so much more.

Throughout the grounds, be entertained

by the All-Star Stunt Dog Show, Jurassic Kingdom, the High-Flying Pages, The Thorni Ridge Exotic Petting Zoo, the Southwest Dairy Farmers Mobile Dairy Classroom, the Hot Glass Academy, and Robinson Wood Carvers, all of whom will have multiple performances daily. Along with these outdoor acts, be sure to check out the many indoor exhibits including the 4-H Exhibit Building, the House Auto Group Auto Museum featuring Corvettes, the Fine Arts Building, the Four Seasons Centre, the Great Outdoors Center, and the Open Class Exhibits in the Flower Building, underneath the grandstand and on the second floor of the Four Seasons Centre.

Check out the fair website, scff.org, to see the schedule for each day of the fair and to plan your time at the fair. Fairgoers can also find helpful information during the fair at the Information Stations. Be sure to take a trip back in time at the Old Iron Show and the Village of Yesteryear, too, along with spending time in the livestock barns and at the livestock shows.

At scff.org, fairgoers can also purchase tickets for this year's grandstand line up, including the FFA Alumni Antique Tractor

Pull on Tuesday, LOCASH with special guest Drake Milligan on Wednesday, Hairball with special guest Strange Daze on Thursday, Craig Morgan with special guest Ashley Barron on Friday, Bulls -N- Barrels with Mutton Bustin' on Saturday and the always popular Demolition Derby on Sunday.

Wow! There is so much to do and see at the fair that it will surely make fairgoers hungry and thirsty. With nearly 100 food vendors, fairgoers will find their old favorites along with new dishes to enjoy!

Those 21+ are invited to enjoy a beverage at the Steele Saloon or Ye Old Beer Garden. The Steele Saloon will feature All-Star Wrestling, open to all, on Tuesday, Oktoberfest on Wednesday, a Bloody Mary Bar and Corn Hole Tournament on Saturday and a Bloody Mary Bar and Euchre Tournament on Sunday.

Featured on the Ye Old Beer Garden stage this year are Johnny Holm Band on Tuesday evening, IV Play on Wednesday evening, Jacuzzi Puma Thursday evening, Swerve on Friday afternoon, Shirts and Skins Friday evening, Led Penny Saturday afternoon, Travis Thamert Saturday evening, Dan Stursa Band on

Sunday afternoon and The White Keys on Sunday night.

For the thrill seekers among us, Gold Star Amusements will offer nearly 40 rides on the midway. The popular Mega Ride Tickets are on sale now, exclusively, at the Owatonna Hy-Vee Customer Service Desk from 9 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. The Mega Ride Ticket is \$55 and is good for unlimited rides every day of the fair. The Mega Ride Ticket must be purchased by 5 p.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 15, the opening day of the fair. Each day of the fair also features a daily ride special. Wristbands for the daily ride specials can be purchased at the midway ticket booth the day of the ride special. Check out scff.org for the price and hours of the daily specials.

On behalf of the Steele County Free Fair Board of Directors and Staff, please join me in thanking our countless volunteers and in supporting our many sponsors who have worked hard to make this year's Steele County Free Fair the best yet! We couldn't do it without them!

"Satisfaction Guaranteed in 2023." I'll see you at the fair!

Dan Deml is president of the Steele County Free Fair Board.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED IN 2023

Steele County Free Fair

August 15-20, 2023

2023 Grandstand Entertainment

<u>Tues., Aug. 15</u>	6:00 PM FFA Alumni Classic Antique Tractor Pull
<u>Wed., Aug. 16</u>	7:00 PM LOCASH with special guest Drake Milligan
<u>Thurs., Aug. 17</u>	7:00 PM Hairball with special guest Strange Daze
<u>Fri., Aug. 18</u>	7:00 PM Craig Morgan with special guest Ashley Barron
<u>Sat., Aug. 19</u>	7:30 PM Bulls N Barrels with local Mutton Bustin'
<u>Sun., Aug. 20</u>	2:00 PM IMP Demolition Derby

Steele County Free Fair
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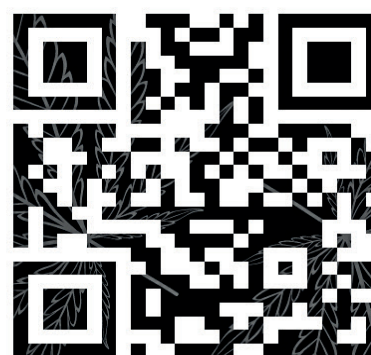
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Klemmensen, Schoenfeld enter Livestock Hall of Fame

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Blooming Prairie's Richard Klemmensen and Owatonna's Mary Jo Schoenfeld are set to be inducted into the Steele County Livestock Hall of Fame in 2023 for their contributions to agriculture both in Steele County and worldwide.

Both inductees are known for their work in livestock, particularly pertaining to pork production, and have spent their careers atop some of the state's elite agriculture organizations.

"We're excited to welcome Mary Jo and Richard to the Hall of Fame. Part of the criteria for being inducted is not only making a difference in the industry, but also showing commitment to Steele County... and they both definitely have done that," said Steele County Free Fair President Dan Deml.

Schoenfeld's induction comes full circle as she first won the Steele County Free Fair Grand Champion Dairy Kottke Award in 1965.

The Owatonna native was also a part of the Steele County Pork Women's Board from 1978-87 and served as the director



Mary Jo Schoenfeld

of the Minnesota Pork Producers Board from 1982-94.

Along the way, Schoenfeld also served as a Steele County 4-H adult leader, promoted pork at metropolitan schools and grocery stores, and worked as an employee for the Steele

County Extension office and the Farm Bureau.

Blooming Prairie's Klemmensen will also enter the Hall of Fame with a laundry list of livestock accolades.

During his career, Klemmensen served as

the president of both the Steele County Pork Producers and Blooming Prairie Farmers Co-Op Elevator Association.

He has also been a member of the Minnesota and National Yorkshire Association – also known

as National Swine – and the Steele County 4-H Livestock Sales Committee.

Still rooted in his hometown, Klemmensen remains a member of Blooming Prairie's Jaycees and Lions Club,

while also serving as the president of the Blooming Prairie Country Club.

Both Schoenfeld and Klemmensen will be formally inducted into the Livestock Hall of Fame at the Show Arena on Tuesday, Aug. 15 at 1 p.m.



Richard Klemmensen



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Owatonna D-Day vet 'Papa Jake' to visit SCFF

BY JONNY CLUBB
STAFF INTERN

Jake Larson, aka Papa Jake of TikTok fame, is an Owatonna native who served in World War II and survived the D-Day invasion of Omaha Beach.

Now 100 years old, Larson will return home to visit the 2023 Steele County Free Fair (SCFF).

Larson joined the National Guard at 15, lying about his age. He was then sent overseas in 1942 and stationed in Northern Ireland. Eventually, Larson ended up at Omaha Beach on D-Day as part of the United States Army V Corps.

Larson says he is the last living member of his unit.

Currently, Papa Jake lives in California. His TikTok account, where he shares stories from a World War II veteran, has over 620,000 followers.

Friend of the fair Steve Smith first informed SCFF manager Scott Kozelka about Papa Jake. Then Kozelka used TikTok to invite Papa Jake to the fair.

“(Owatonna People’s Press associate editor) Annie Harman and I did (a



PHOTO CAPTURED FROM INSTAGRAM

Through the nonprofit Best Defense Foundation, Owatonna native Jake Larson—Papa Jake on social media—made a 2022 trip with other veterans to France, where they marked the 78th anniversary of the World War II D-Day invasion.

TikTok) together and invited him to see if he wanted to come to Steele County Free Fair,” said Kozelka. “Two days later, we got a response, and then we made that connection.”

Kozelka has talked to Papa Jake several times since their first interaction.

“He’s excited. He’s got family members from all over the country he says are coming to see him here at the fair,” Kozelka said.

Papa Jake’s fair schedule was not finalized at press time, but he will be taking part in the Tuesday night flag raising and will likely be spending time in

the museum and the Village of Yesteryear. He will also be selling copies of his book, titled “The Luckiest Man in the World.”

“We’re excited to have him,” Kozelka said. He noted how special it is to have any veteran visit the fair, let alone a D-Day veteran from Owatonna.



PHOTO CAPTURED FROM INSTAGRAM

Owatonna native and D-Day veteran Jake Larson, known as Papa Jake to his social media followers, will be an honored guest at the 2023 Steele County Free Fair.

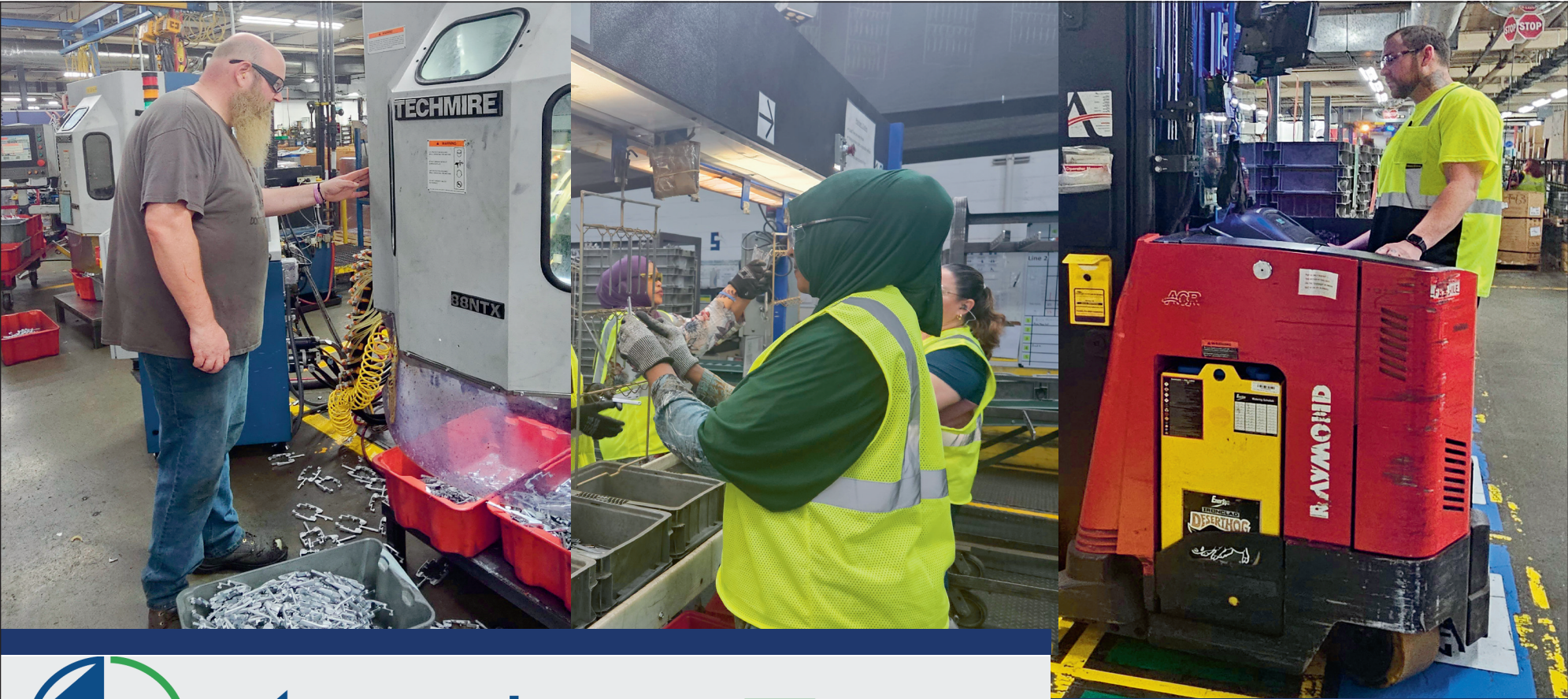


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Steele fair aims to create grandstand experience

BY JONI HUBRED
NEWS EDITOR

With big name acts performing this year at the Steele County Fair, organizers are working to expand on the crowd's overall experience.

Officials have introduced new options that will make for an improved concert experience across the board, fair manager Scott Kozelka said.

"We're trying to make it an event, rather than a concert," he said.

Even general admission ticket holders will have an improved view of Daikin Grandstand Stage performances with a new jumbotron 17-foot-by-10-foot LED screen. This ticketing option also has both covered and open seating areas.

The Pit View gets audience members closer to the stage, and those ticket holders will have a special entrance on the north side of the grandstand. In addition to the Tin Roof Tavern serving up cocktails and

other drinks, there's a new beer sales alley that runs around the front, and on either side, of the stage.

Pit View ticket holders can also take advantage of bleacher seating available before and during concerts.

At the high end, those who opt for the Fareway Meat & Grocery VIP experience will have a front row, unobstructed view

of the stage, parking right behind the stage, access to a VIP tent and the beer sales alley, and dedicated servers at the Tin Roof Tavern.

VIPs also will enjoy light hors d'oeuvres starting at 4 p.m. before every concert, and two drink tickets.

Each concert will also have an opening act per-

forming a full one-hour set before the headliner:

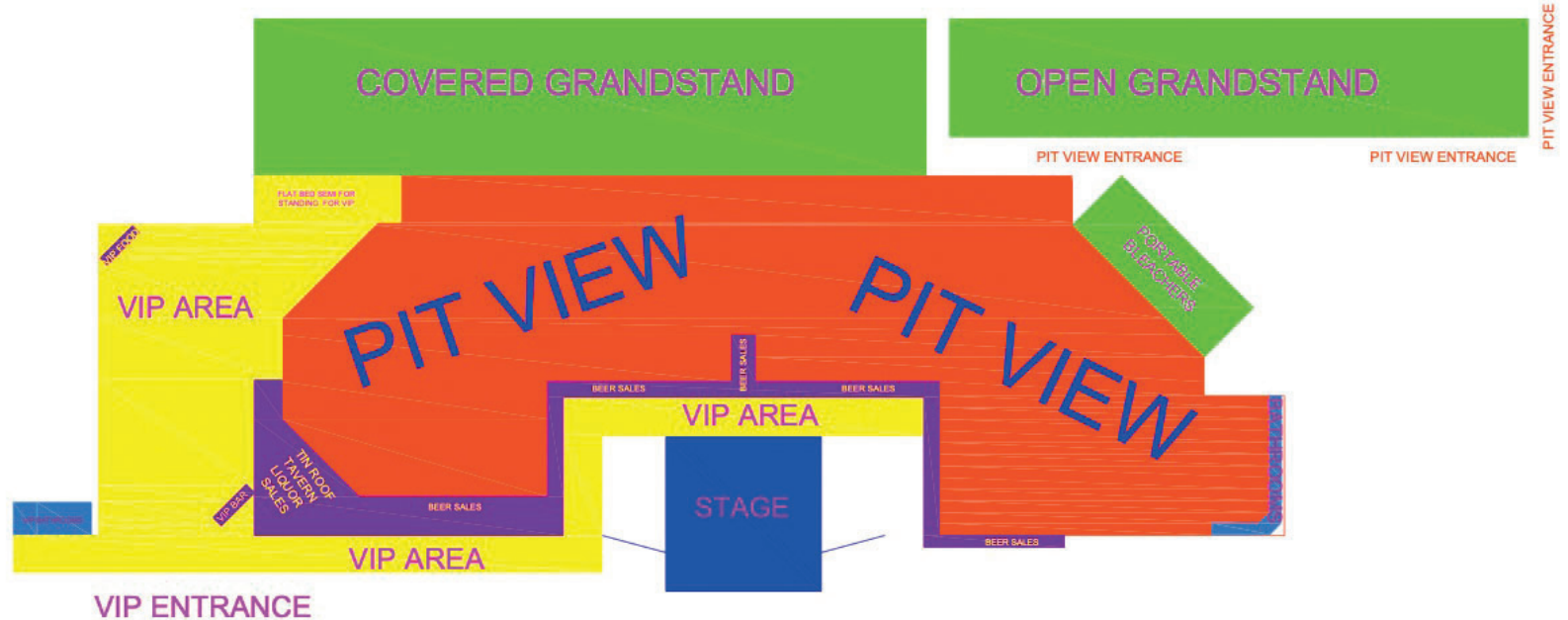
- LOCASH with Drake Milligan on Aug. 16
- Hairball Concert with Strange Daze on Aug. 17

- Craig Morgan with Ashley Barron on Aug. 18

The new options are designed to make this year's musical offerings better than ever.

"We're just trying to make it the perfect experience," Kozelka said.

Purchase tickets for all fair grandstand events at tickets.scff.org/tickets.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

VIP PARKING

This map shows new seating options for this year's Steele County Free Fair Daikin Grandstand Stage shows. Pit View and VIP guests will be closer to the stage, with direct access to the Tin Roof Tavern and beer sales.



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SCFF, Owatonna Foundation partner for a Great Outdoors Center

BY KAY FATE AND
JONI HUBRED
STAFF WRITERS

There have been plenty of changes to the Steele County Fairgrounds over the last 100 years or so, but perhaps none quite as dramatic as the former dark little building on the west edge of the grounds.

The Great Outdoors Center is now a vibrant, modern facility, thanks in no small part to some heavy hitters.

More than \$130,000 worth of projects have been completed in and on the building in the past three years, said Scott Kozelka, manager of the Steele County Free Fair.

The price tag includes new siding, uncovering previously covered windows; new windows; board repair and replacement for displays; electrical work; new backdrops for displays and about 20 new mounts – including one so large it will require a moving company to get it inside – thanks to a donation from Dave and Nancy Olson.

In addition, the Owatonna Foundation has contributed about \$44,000 toward the work, helping with siding and repairs,



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Old windows high on the Great Outdoors Center were uncovered, then replaced, allowing more natural light inside the 1938 building. The windows will be operated electronically, bringing natural ventilation, as well.

as well as with those new windows and additional repairs of the building.

The SCFF paid for the remaining costs of nearly \$90,000.

The GOC revival has made it once again a showcase for natural resource exhibits, fish and reptiles, as well as master gardeners.

The new windows near the top of the building allow more natural light and ventilation.

Because the windows

are so high, the hardware includes electronics to open and close them, Kozelka said.

The fountain that drew coin-tossers for years is gone, but the pond remains. It will be stocked with native species of fish by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Raptors from the University of Minnesota will make an appearance again this year, as will the National Eagle Center

See SCFF on 38 ►



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Source: 2023PCN Survey, n=181 Grades 9-12, BPPS



STAFF PHOTO BY JONNY CLUBB

These are just some of the trophies donated by Dave and Nancy Olson and now on display at the Great Outdoors Center on the Steele County fairgrounds.



STAFF PHOTO BY JONNY CLUBB

These trophies represent Dave Olson's successful completion of the National Wild Turkey Federations's Royal Grand Slam of North America. He bagged one each of five species: Rio Grande, Merriam's, Eastern, Osceola, and Gould's.

Lifelong hunter donates 50 mounts to the Great Outdoors Center

BY JONNY CLUBB

STAFF INTERN

The Great Outdoors Center will have a fresh, new look at the Steele County Free Fair this year.

"We have a big pond in there that will be Minnesota native fish. We are doing some work in there to clean that pond up," said Tim Ardlit, SCFF Treasurer. "We also have a lot of new wildlife mounts that have been donated to us."

The new mounts came from Sandy and Mike Seykora, Matt Seykora, and Dave "Ole" and Nancy

Olson. Fifty of the new mounts were donated by the Olsons alone.

Dave Olson has hunted throughout North America. His trophies include bear, deer, a caribou, and all five turkeys from the National Wild Turkey Federations's Royal Grand Slam of North America.

Regardless of all the trophies brought home, the experience of the hunt is the most fun part for Olson.

"The hunt is big, but it's only half of it. The other half is the things I've experienced in nature that people that don't get out in nature

don't see," Olson said.

Olson's love of hunting has brought him to a number of incredible places. Within 150 miles of the Arctic Circle, he successfully hunted for a caribou.

He has also been all over the continent to track down the five wild turkey species in the Royal Grand Slam of North America. Olson started by harvesting at least one each of the Rio Grande, Merriam's, Eastern, and Osceola species.

Olson said he was then fortunate to complete the Royal Grand Slam in Mexico, where he harvested a

Gould's turkey.

Olson's most exciting hunt was ultimately unsuccessful.

"The most tense and thrilling is after the grizzly," Olson said. "You have no idea the feeling if you're from here to that door and there's a sow grizzly puffing and clicking her teeth with two one-year-old cubs behind her. I can't explain that feeling."

Olson saw a number of grizzlies on his hunts, but never found one that was legal to hunt.

Olson decided to donate his mounts after he attended a Chamber After Hours

and heard about the need for mounts at the newly remodeled Great Outdoors Center. He said he and his wife are "getting to the age where we gotta start downsizing". Talks with the fair board went well and "here we are."

"It's a win-win because we were able to enjoy them and now everybody can enjoy them," Nancy Olson added.

Dave gave a lot of credit to Nancy for being supportive throughout his hunting days.

"Without her, I never would have been able to do it," he said.

Dave also wanted to give credit to Kevin Dillmuth and Jerome Spindler for all the work and attention to detail they have put into hanging the mounts at the Great Outdoors Center.

The Great Outdoors Center hours during the fair are Tuesday, 3-9 p.m.; Wednesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; and Sunday, 10:30 a.m.-8 p.m. Activities will include RAD Zoo, National Eagle Center, Mayo Clinic Peregrine Falcon, University of Minnesota Raptor Center, and more. Visit scff.org for the full schedule.



Fair tops Owatonna branding survey

BY JONI HUBRED
NEWS EDITOR

As part of a year-long branding process, a community survey asked residents to identify Owatonna's two greatest assets. The Steele County Free Fair (SCFF) was number one with 39% of respondents, Owatonna Chamber of Commerce and Tourism (OACCT)

president Brad Meier said. "It definitely is a big part of our identity here. It was interesting because I think the community really identifies with the fair, and it has become something the whole community is proud of," he said. Meier believes the reason for that starts with the size of the event. As the largest county fair in Minnesota, SCFF offers plenty

of big-name entertainment in the grandstand, a large number of vendors, a wide range of fair foods, and other amenities. Also, he said, many people from the community are involved as volunteers, vendors, exhibitors, and attendees. "I think it's a unique event because it involves so many people in the community," Meier said.

That includes the Chamber, which participates in several ways through its tourism efforts. OACCT answers calls for the fair and has a booth at the event. "Our team here is also involved in different ways," Meier said. "We're one of many organizations that partner with the fair." Also, he added, the fairgrounds itself is a

great asset, hosting events throughout the year that bring people to town. The survey was part of the branding process research phase and all about understanding people's perspectives and how they feel about Owatonna. That part is complete, Meier said, and "we're kind of right at the midpoint... We have had some meetings in the creative phase."

At this point, the group leading the branding effort is looking at potential logos and taglines and how those may be used. The process is expected to finish up in September. "Something we're thinking about is, we are the home of the Steele County Free Fair," Meier said. "That is part of our identity, and it's part of that discussion."



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SUBMITTED PHOTO

Former WWE superstar "Gangrel" headlines the Steele Showdown Two card for MAW at the 2023 Steele County Free Fair. Gangrel will face current tag-team champion Miles Mora in the main event.



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

MAW wrestler "JDX" follows through with a takedown against "Isaiah Moore" in the opening match at the 2022 Steele County Free Fair. JDX went on to win the match by fall.

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

Midwest All-Star Wrestling (MAW) will return to the Steele County Free Fair for its Steele Showdown Two at the Steele Saloon on Tuesday, Aug. 15.

After drawing a large crowd ringside last year, MAW has hopes of exciting fans in 2023 with a high-level guest appearance.

"Former World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) superstar 'Gangrel' will wrestle in the main event with one-half of our title-winning tag team, Miles Mora," said MAW owner Dave Armitrano.

Fans will also have their chance to meet Gangrel during a free meet and greet, autograph signing and photo opportunity session at 6 p.m. – one hour before the event begins at 7 p.m..

However, the bout card that MAW has put together also has plenty of show-stopping matches leading up to the main event.

Owatonna's own Cody O'Neill will make his return to town against his foe Aaron Corbin in a tag-team match featuring two wrestlers who will only be revealed to the crowd at the event.

Corbin will surely be out for blood after his loss to O'Neill at the Steele Showdown One last year.

Also appearing in the match will be Steele County Free Fair Manager Scott Kozelka, who will be in the corner of O'Neill, aiding in the hometown hero's efforts.

Fighting for glory in the bout beforehand will be Maggie Peters and Heather Reckless, both of whom will be making their MAW debuts.

According to Armitrano, taking over the preliminary bouts will be challengers from MAW's 2023 Prospect Cup tournament.

Names of the wrestlers involved have yet to be announced.

"We're really excited. When Scott Kozelka reached out to book us again this year, one of the things he said was that we need to get more seating," said

Armitrano. "The fans of Owatonna just came by the hundreds last year. We've had great feedback. When we announced earlier this month, we had people planning on attending the fair just flood our social media with positive comments."



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

"Isaiah Moore" throws a spinning kick to the head of "JDX" in the two's opening match for MAW at the 2022 Steele County Free Fair. Moore went on to lose the match by fall after a dramatic bout.



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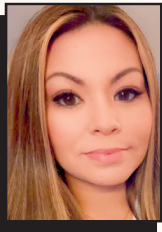
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Village of Yesteryear
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- September 7: Onward and Upward: Changing roles of Women Today- Panel Discussion and Luncheon
 - 11:30 at the History Center
 - \$20 for members, \$25 for non-members
 - RSVP required
- September 16: Orphanage Museum Fall Celebration
 - 12:00- 4:00 pm at the Orphanage Museum
 - This annual event brings the State School era to life with character reenactors, lawn games, crafts, horse-drawn wagon rides, food, and so much more.
- September 30: Oktoberfest
 - 4:00pm to 8:00pm at the History Center
 - Food, Music, and Beer
- October 12: A Day Away Bus Trip to Austin, MN
 - 8:00am to 5:00pm
 - SPAM museum, Historic Hormel House, Hormel Estate, Hormel Nature Center, and a catered lunch
 - \$65 for members, \$70 for non-members
 - Reservations close September 29.

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GREG THE GREAT

Brings magic to Steele County Fair

BY HOWARD LESTRUD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

There's a strange object flying overhead. Is it a plane? Is it a bird? Is it Superman? Is it a UFO?

No, it's Greg the Great, from Blooming Prairie. As a popular magician, he spins magic and comedy together to entertain audiences of all ages.

Greg the Great is also known as Greg Skillestad, Blooming Prairie's police chief. He will bring his magic show to the Steele County Fair on the last

day of the fair, Sunday, Aug. 20, performing two shows, 2 p.m. and 6 p.m.

These shows represent the first time Greg the Great has performed at the Steele County Fair. He will unveil his magic act on the Elmer Reseland Stage located in the KRFO Town Square. The Steele County Fair runs from Aug. 15-20.

Skillestad has already performed two shows at the Dodge County Fair. Other gigs include the Washington County Fair in Lake Elmo, Aug. 2-6.

Greg the Great has been doing magic tricks ever

since he was 10 years old. As a professional, he is in his 23rd year.

Skillestad does about three shows per month with themes including birthdays, summer reading, and carnival. His shows are very interactive, with kids dominating the sounds that turn into laughs.

The cooing of five doves provides the backdrop for his time of preparation. A live bunny is also in the magic shows.

Skillestad also has a new backdrop on his stage. He said it only takes



STAFF PHOTO BY HOWARD LESTRUD

Magician Greg Skillestad, also known as Greg the Great, is all smiles about the next act involving this pretty bunny, named Cannonball.



STAFF PHOTO BY HOWARD LESTRUD

Greg the Great unveils these beautiful flowers during the beginning of his act. He'll perform Sunday, August 20, at the Steele County Free Fair.

30 seconds to put up and 30 seconds to tear down.

While he does upwards of 50 shows a year, Skillestad says, "It's called vacation," when people ask how he finds time to be a magician and a police chief.

While working at the Steele County Jail and Olmsted years ago, Skillestad shared tricks with the inmates. He also tries out his tricks on family and friends.

This year's show will bring back an act that Greg the Great introduced last year: a bunny shot from a cannon. It's fitting that his small, white rabbit is named Cannonball.

Skillestad has a special cannon, which was designed and made by Dan Wolfe of Smoky Mountain Magic of Tennessee. Skillestad said he met Wolfe on Facebook. The cannonball act was Wolfe's idea.

Skillestad said he used to jump out of airplanes while serving in the U.S. Army, and "I decided to put Cannonball to the test."

With excitement in his eyes, Skillestad said the target will be a size 12-inch balloon, and, if all goes well, Cannonball will pop the balloon and re-appear in its place.

Skillestad said none of his animals get hurt on stage.

"It's a show guaranteed to entertain the whole family," he said.

Greg the Great opens his shows with magic boxes. He unveils some colorful flowers, which came from Thailand. He also had some "really showy flowers" that came from the U.S. The quality is much better in the U.S. flowers, he said.

"We (Blooming Prairie High School) are the Blossoms showing flower power," Skillestad said.

Using many changes of facial expression, Skillestad has to be an actor, too. He said his show is "always moving".

"I try to add showmanship," he said. "I will never do a show without a rabbit or dove."

Skillestad said his wife, Allyson, is his biggest critic and will make recommendations for how he can change his shows. He likes to hear feedback and said he will never forget one child's description of his magic show as "unbelievable." He said he loves to involve kids in his shows.

"My goal is to put smiles on faces and we want everything to be great," Skillestad said.

"I'm really excited about putting on a magic show at the fair in Steele County," he added. "Maybe when I retire, I will try to perform at the Minnesota State Fair."

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Morgan back for Friday night show at SCFF

LOCASH to perform Wednesday

BY KAY FATE
STAFF WRITER

Two years ago, Craig Morgan fans had to take a literal rain check for his performance at the Steele County Free Fair.

This year, they can cash it in.

Morgan is returning to Owatonna for the summer's biggest event; he'll headline Friday night's grandstand event at the SCFF.

But this year, "We're making it an event," said Scott Kozelka, manager of the SCFF. "We're going to offer VIP experiences, along with an experience for all of our guests, for all of our shows."

That includes not only Morgan, but Wednesday's grandstand show featuring LOCASH, named "country music's iconic feel-good duo" in 2021 by People, and Thursday's performance by Hairball, the band "back by popular demand" for its 22nd consecutive show, Kozelka said.

Craig Morgan

The music icon was scheduled to perform at the 2021 SCFF. Strong winds and heavy rain moved through the area right about showtime, forcing fair officials to cancel.

Morgan is one of



LOCASH will be performing at the grandstand Wednesday night.

country music's best-loved artists and has sent 25 songs up the Billboard charts. His signature hits include "Bonfire," "Almost Home," "Redneck Yacht Club," and "That's What I Love About Sunday."

He is a TV personality, celebrated outdoorsman, and Army veteran, spending 17 years in the U.S. Army and Army Reserves. Morgan remains an avid supporter of America's military personnel and has made 16 overseas trips to perform for troops.

Morgan received one of country music's highest honors when he was inducted as a member of the Grand Ole Opry in 2008.

His special guest this year is **Ashley Barron**.

If that name sounds familiar, it's because she opened for Maddie and Tae at the 2022 SCFF.

"She loved being in Owatonna," Kozelka said. "If you look at some of her highlight videos," there are shots from her performance last year.

One of her original singles, "Beer in a Bar," received critical acclaim and hit No. 37 on Billboard.

LOCASH

Formerly known as LoCash Cowboy, vocalists Preston Brust and Chris Lucas had their breakout hit "I Love This Life" in 2015, followed by "I Know Somebody" in 2016, "Feels Like a Party" in 2018 and "One Big Country Song" in 2019.

They were nominated for Vocal Duo of the Year at the County Music Association Awards in 2017.

More recently, LOCASH collaborated with The Beach Boys' Mike Love and Bruce Johnston on a new version of their song "Beach Boys."

Their special guest is **Drake Milligan**, a 24-year-old who placed third last season on "America's Got Talent" and cites George Strait and Elvis Presley as his musical heroes.

His debut album of original songs, released the day after the finale, hit No. 1 on iTunes Country Album.

"We thought he'd be a great opener for LOCASH;



Craig Morgan is set to return to the grandstand after being rained out in 2021.

he's got some songs that are going to pop, once people see him," Kozelka said. "He's going to play a full set. It's not just our headliners – it's a show."

VIP tickets

Just 150 VIP tickets will be sold per event; the higher price gets concert-goers close to the stage in a party tent, with beverage tickets, appetizers, a swag bag and, of course, the show. They will also be allowed to park in the infield.

It's not just for the musical acts, either: The VIP experience is also available for Saturday night's Bulls and Barrels. This year, the bleachers for the rodeo will be on the south end of the arena, "so when the barrel racers

are running in, they're running right at" the spectators, Kozelka said – from a distance, of course.

"We want this to be an attraction," he said. "We want to get people to come – and stay – in southern Minnesota to get their concert entertainment."

Hairball, an 80s cover band the likes of which you've never seen, is 23 years old and going strong.

As its members like to say, "A band puts on a concert; Hairball puts on an event."

Minneapolis-based rock band Strange Daze will be the special guest. They've also toured with Aerosmith, 3 Doors Down,

See **MORGAN** on 38 ►

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'A sense of pride'

County honors Ahrens family partnership

BY JONI HUBRED
NEWS EDITOR

On a 90-degree day in late July, Brian Ahrens was up early to work in the cooler morning hours on his family's six-generation, Havana Township farm.

The Ahrens family has been farming the same land since 1899. Fred Ahrens arrived from Germany in 1867, at age 17. Later elected county commissioner, he was instrumental in building the now historic Steele County Courthouse on East Main Street in Owatonna.

Over time, Fred, Jr.,

took over from his father, then Martin and Lorraine, parents of Brian, Brad, and Marshall. Brian and Brad took over in 1976, later joined by Marshall, and operate the farm with their wives and children under the Ahrens Family Partnership.

This year, the group was named Steele County Farm Family of the Year. Their partnership includes Brian and Lisa, Marshall and Patty, and Brian and Lisa's sons, Nolan and wife Missy, and Nate and wife Molly. (The couple also has a daughter, Amber, who is married to Mark Dobberstein).

Brad Ahrens retired in 2019.

The nomination, said Lisa, was a surprise, and the name of the nominator remains under wraps—though Brian has his suspicions. She was raised on a dairy farm in Litomysl and was well aware of the road ahead when the couple married in 1980.

Like farmers across the country, the Ahrens struggled in that decade. Brian worked a full-time job, then came home to farm, putting in many 20-hour days.

Through the years—and still today—they've dealt with many challenges, from burdensome government regulations to misconceptions about farming itself.

"(People) want an image of the farmer in a straw hat with 160 acres," Brian said. "There's so many generations removed from the farm, people don't know where their food comes from."

"We can't feed a farm on the amount of acres our parents fed us," Lisa added. "There's a lot of education that needs to be done."

Still, she said, "I can't imagine doing anything different. For me, there's a lot of satisfaction when they're putting the crop in in the spring and harvest-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The Ahrens Family Partnership participated in this year's Blooming Prairie Fourth of July parade. The group represents this year's Steele County Family Farm of the Year.

ing in the fall. There's a sense of pride."

Having his sons involved in the partnership now has been a dream come true for Brian. But first, the boys worked off the farm, on the advice of their parents.

"I told them, work for somebody else and find out if it's something they wanted to do," Brian said.

There was little doubt, though, which path they'd choose—the oldest Ahrens boy started driving a tractor when he was just eight years old.

"It was in their blood," Lisa said. "They always knew they wanted to farm."

The Ahrens Family Partnership is headed from a sixth to a seventh generation. Lisa has al-

"We want to keep the legacy going."

Lisa Ahrens

Farm Family of Year

ways done daycare for the couple's seven grandchildren, who have all helped out with chores on the family farm.

"We want to keep the legacy going," she said.

University of Minnesota Extension committees in each county choose one family to honor every year. After being nominated, families submit a history for evaluation, and selection is based on their "demonstrated commitment to their communities and to enhancing and supporting agriculture."

In addition to farming, Ahrens family members have been very involved in the Minnesota Corn and Soybean Growers Association, Owatonna FFA, Steele County Ag Society, 4-H, Steele County Fair, Steele County Pork Producers, St. John's and Trinity Lutheran churches, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Claremont Chamber of Commerce, and many area sports organizations.

The family will be honored on Tuesday, August 15, during the Hall of Fame ceremony at the Steele County Free Fair.



STAFF PHOTO BY JONI HUBRED

Children and grandchildren alike love this model of the Ahrens Family Farm, which Brian Ahrens asked a neighbor to create years ago. A box underneath holds even more farm-themed toys.



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CULINARY C

Baker mixes up bars containing 5 “must have” ingredients

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY
RICK BUSSLER**

From her kitchen in the northeast end of Owatonna, Mary Schenk is busy whipping up a concoction for the upcoming Culinary Challenge at the Steele County Free Fair. But it can't just be any old recipe.

As part of the challenge, bakers must incorporate five ingredients into whatever they want. This year's secret ingredients are butterscotch chips, marshmallows,

apple sauce, Cheerios and coconut.

Once the ingredients are released by fair officials, the race is on for area bakers to come up with something worthy of entering at the fair. There are two divisions for the challenge: juniors, which requires three special ingredients, and seniors. The challenge is sponsored by Burke's Taffy.

“It is trial and error,” says Schenk. “We start with a basic recipe that has one or two of the ingredients and expand on it.”

Schenk's hot baking idea?

“I'm baking a Disappearing Marshmallow Brownie with a crumble topping,” she said.

She credits the internet with helping her find ideas for recipes.

Looking at this year's list of ingredients, Schenk finds apple sauce isn't real common for baked goods. However, she said some people utilize apple sauce in place of butter.

During an interview in early August, Schenk was already on her third time of experimenting with the

recipe, which she doesn't wish to disclose at this time. “The first two times I didn't have the right proportion of liquid and flour,” she said, adding the most she has experimented with a recipe for the fair in the past is five times.

Last year, she made strawberry bars and “nailed it” on the advice of her husband, David, on the first try. She won reserve champion at last year's fair. (See recipe within this story.)

Some years she even utilizes her neighbors to sample the baked goods, though she's not convinced that they are totally honest with her. “My family doesn't hesitate to let me know how they feel. That's okay, though. That's how we roll,” she said.

“Every year is a challenge,” Schenk said, noting some years she doesn't know exactly how to match up ingredients until she gets to the grocery store. “You don't want to go with anything whacky.”

Schenk said she's not exactly sure about the history of the challenge, but she got involved back in



Mary Schenk mixes up a batch of Disappearing Marshmallow Bars for Challenge at the fair for the past 10 years and has come up with a few



2013 after a man at a water aerobics class she takes encouraged her to try it.

After she entered the first year, “I was kind of hooked,” she said.

She thinks the secret to the challenge is preparing a baked good that is “looking good.” Last year, for example, she garnished her strawberry bars with fresh fruits. She is still trying to figure out how to spruce up her brownies for this year.

“I'm looking for how to combine the flavors and texture to find something that's pleasing to people,” said Schenk, who is retired from Federated Insurance. “I like the creativity and the challenge.”

Schenk credits her mother-in-law with developing the love of baking. One of her favorites to bake is angel food cake from scratch. “I have my mother-in-law's recipe,

HALLENGE



the upcoming Steele County Free Fair. She has entered Culinary v champion and reserve champions.

"I like the creativity and the challenge."

Mary Schenk

Culinary Challenge Entrant

and I get out the old mixer for that one," she said. Asked what she enjoys the most, she laughed and said, "eating." She also enjoys sharing her baked goods with other family members and neighbors. "We give them treats here

and there just to be neighborly," she added. Besides baking, Schenk also keeps busy with church activities, water aerobics, quilting, road trips and meeting friends for lunch. She also enjoys her family, which includes

three grown children and six grandchildren. Schenk will be bringing her plate of bars to the fair on Monday for judging. She will be vying for the grand prize of \$25. "It doesn't cover your ingredients, though, if you make it five times. I can guarantee you," Schenk said. While the baked goods always end up being great conversation pieces, the veteran baker has a confession to make. "I have to be honest—most of these I don't make again."



Recipe

Ingredients

- 1 can strawberry pie filling
- 1 can sweetened condensed milk
- 1 cup fresh blueberries
- ½ cup butter plus 2 Tbsp. (divided)
- 2 cups Bisquick
- ½ cup firmly packed brown sugar
- ½ cup crushed Club crackers
- ½ cup chopped malted milk balls
- 1 cup white chocolate chips
- Fresh strawberries and blueberries for garnish

RECIPE: *Strawberry Bars*
FROM THE KITCHEN OF: Mary Schenk

Directions

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray 9x13-inch pan with no-stick cooking spray. Combine pie filling, sweetened condensed milk and 1 cup blueberries into a medium bowl. Place Bisquick in large bowl. Cut in ½ cup butter with pastry blender until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Stir in strawberry mixture. Spread into prepared pan. Combine cracker crumbs, malted milk ball crumbs and brown sugar in small bowl. Cut in remaining 2 Tbsp. butter until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Sprinkle evenly over strawberry mixture. Bake 60 to 70 minutes or until golden brown. Cool. Cut bars into squares. In the microwave melt the white chocolate chips. Spoon a small dollop of melted chips onto each square. Garnish with fresh strawberries and blueberries on top of the white chocolate dollops.

Hungry for something new?

Try these delicacies at the fair



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Little Blue Elephant, the Minot, N.D., food truck lives up to its name. It offers Thai food, including potstickers, drunken noodles and a variety of sushi choices.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The best-selling item on the menu is the Loaded Waffle Fries, a generous serving of waffle fries topped with nacho cheese sauce, sour cream, barbecue sauce, onion, jalapenos and pulled pork that owner Mike Rumsey smokes himself.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Just the Meats food stand offers Brazilian Churrasco-style meat, including filet mignon.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Just Take the Cake Too will visit the Steele County Free Fair for the first time this year. Kathi Finley is bringing her extreme milk shakes, which she describes as “our house shakes topped with donuts, cookies, brownies, ice cream cones and as much other fun stuff as we can fit.”

The Little Blue Elephant:

Ken Thedsomboon shuts down his brick-and-mortar restaurant in downtown Minot, N.D., to hit the road during the summer, serving authentic Thai food. In addition to his award-winning “monkey balls,” a tempura fried roll stuffed with salmon, cream cheese and special sauce, he’ll offer spring rolls, potstickers, drunken noodles and sushi choices from his spot in front of the Fine Arts building.

Just Take the Cake:

This mobile business makes its way to the SCFF from just down U.S. Highway 218 in Austin. Kathi Finley said her mobile market was “born from an accident” when she decided to do a city-wide bake sale during her first year as the executive director for Paint the Town Pink, Spamtown’s annual cancer fundraiser. That was more than 10 years ago. It evolved into Finley baking for weddings and larger events; she opened a mobile bistro in fall 2021.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The bruschetta cheese bread has been the most popular item coming out of the Lakes Co. Eats food trailer. It starts with fresh French bread, then their garlic butter sauce, lots of melted cheese, freshly chopped cherry tomatoes and basil – finished with a balsamic glaze, described as “the perfect outdoor summer food.”

In Owatonna, she’ll feature a coffee bar, beignets and extreme milk shakes at the north end of the fairgrounds.

Just the Meats:

This stand has been catering Brazilian Churrasco grilled meats to street fairs and festivals in the upper Midwest since 2021. Churrasco is the national barbecue of Brazil, with the meats cooked on a rotisserie. They will feature bacon-wrapped filet mignon, pork tenderloin and chicken, as well as butter grilled herb potatoes and macaroni and cheese with bacon – all found on the

north end of the fairgrounds.

DeAnna’s Desserts:

While not new to the SCFF food scene – in fact, she missed last year – DeAnna is bringing some new-to-us offerings to the 2023 concession scene: deep-fried key lime pie, deep-fried banana pudding, apple dumplings and strawberry shortcake. That banana pudding features donut holes layered with fresh bananas, banana pudding, whipped cream and a caramel drizzle. You can find DeAnna near the Flower Building.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The sticky rice and mango is a popular choice for customers of Little Blue Elephant food truck; the rice is made with coconut milk.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Stagecoach BBQ and Grill food truck, out of Brownsdale, features the Stagecoach XL Great Burger, a half-pound patty topped with pepper jack cheese, BBQ sauce, bacon, a pile of pulled pork and an onion ring

Lakes Co. Eats:

This vendor got its start as Lakes Company, a place to find apparel and gifts that show its Minnesota pride. This new expansion to a food trailer was a “leap of faith,” its owners say, but has developed a strong following. It offers gourmet cheese breads that include bruschetta, spinach artichoke and buffalo chicken, along with unique dipping sauces. Lakes Co. Eats, which is based in Waterville, will be located near the All-Star Stunt Dogs.

Stagecoach BBQ and Grill:

This is another food truck making the quick trip north from Mower County. Stagecoach BBQ and Grill has its home behind the Frontier Lounge in Brownsdale, but is bringing its burgers, waffle fries and pulled pork to Owatonna. Owner Mike Rumsey smokes the pork himself – and serves it on a variety of items, including

his Stagecoach XL Great Burger, a half-pound patty topped with pepper jack cheese, BBQ sauce, bacon, a pile of pulled pork and an onion ring. The orange truck will be on the north end of the grounds near the Steele Saloon.

Rockin’ Asian:

This vendor from Lakeville will feature Philly steak egg rolls from their spot near the Swine Barn.

Godfather’s Pickle Pizza:

Pretty self-explanatory, right? This new slice is a regular crust topped with sauce, mozzarella cheese and “a whole lot of pickles.” It will be located on the north end of the fairgrounds, near the exotic petting zoo.

Craven’ Asian:

Their trailer, parked in front of the grandstand, features egg rolls, boba tea and cream cheese wontons. The owner is from St. Paul.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

DeAnna’s Desserts will offer deep-fried banana pudding, which is donut holes layered with fresh bananas, banana pudding, whipped cream and a caramel drizzle. The food truck will be located near the Flower Building.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

What better place for one of the messiest desserts to come out of New Orleans? Just Take the Cake Too offers a coffee bar and beignets, deep-fried little pastry squares that are generously sprinkled with confectioner’s sugar. The mobile bistro will be on the north end of the fairgrounds.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Lakes Co. Eats, out of Waterville, started as a “fun idea” that has quickly blossomed. The trailer offers gourmet cheese breads and non-alcoholic mojitos, orange creamsicles and more.

Auto Museum to feature Corvettes

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

The Auto Museum will feature Corvettes at the Steele County Free Fair this year with 14 vehicles set to take center stage.

Automotive fans and historians alike are in for a treat as the cars represent multiple manufacturing and style eras.

"We have Corvettes from 1954 all the way through 2020," said Auto Museum co-superintendent Terry Hansen.

According to Hansen, the museum chose to highlight Corvettes this year because it had never hosted a Corvette-only show.

The idea for each year's show varies between manufacturers, eras and even styles of cars – 2022 featured convertibles.

"We've had mostly positive comments about choosing Corvettes for this year. Of course, if you're a Ford lover, you'll likely think it should be something different," said Hansen with a laugh.

The 14 Corvettes will be displayed at the Auto Museum building just north of the Four Seasons Centre every day of the fair with cars on display from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m.

The only days that opening and closing times will vary are the first and last day of the fair.

On Tuesday, Aug. 15 cars will be on exhibit from 5-10 p.m., while on Sunday, Aug. 20 the museum will open at 10 a.m. and close at 8 p.m.

According to Hansen, the show saw around 13,000 visitors last year.

Two seven-car columns of Corvettes will line the long building upon entry with each car featuring its own plaque displaying the car's make, model owner and a brief summary of its history.

Those looking for more info at the event can speak with co-superintendents Terry and Robin Hansen, Charlie and Gretchen Kaplin, Jon Simon and Don Thiede.





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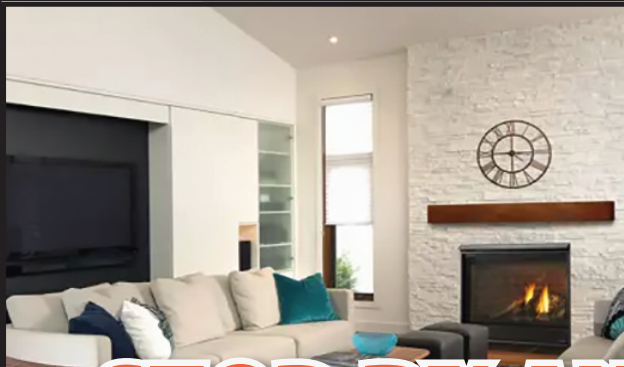
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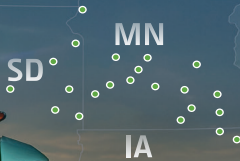


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NO MORE ATTENDANCE FIGURES

Fair shifts focus in determining its success

BY RICK BUSSLER

If you're expecting to find out how many people attended this year's Steele County Free Fair, you're out of luck, or plan to devise your own plan to count.

That's because fair officials last year stopped their decades-old practice of estimating fair attendance.

The fair has records dating back to 1918 with attendance figures. In 1918, 5,000 people attended the fair. When the fair switched to a free gate in 1927, officials released an estimated attendance figure based on a special formula including beer sales, arcade sales, midway sales, parking and ATM transactions.

The last estimated attendance figure of 303,091 was released after the 2021 fair. The record attendance came in 2013 with 350,899 people.

Quite honestly, it was never an exact science, and the fair now admits it was always a guess, said Dan Deml, president of the Steele County Free Fair. After attending a

national convention a few years ago, he said, it became apparent the fair needed to move away from its practice of estimating attendance.

"When you don't know for sure and you're guessing, it shouldn't be the barometer of your fair," said Deml. "We're not focusing on attendance any longer because we don't have a (paid) gate," he added.

Deml went on to say, "We don't judge our success or failure on the number of people, especially when you have no way of documenting it. The idea of judging (the fair's success) with attendance isn't realistic."

Instead, the fair is determining its success by the number and quality of activities and educational programs it offers throughout the six-day event.

"We have to understand we like a lot of people at our fair, but it's not the reality of what we do," Deml said.

But don't expect Steele County to stop considering itself as the largest fair in Minnesota.

When questioned about how the fair can claim

being the largest county fair without attendance figures, Deml explained that they have to submit receipts and financial reports to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture for reimbursement of premiums. Based on those documents, Steele County consistently comes out on top of all fairs in the state.

"Typically, we were at the top or near top in total exhibits and premium payouts," Deml said.

And, Deml added, food vendors regularly tell them that Steele County is the largest fair that they work at.

Deml admits that Steele County is often the envy of fairs across the state when they gather for the Minnesota Federation of County Fairs in January. "We get questioned all the time, 'How the hell do you do this?'" Deml said.

And, even Deml has no silver bullet answer for them.

"Sometimes, I'm even flabbergasted by it," he said. "I look out by 7 p.m. on Tuesday and there are people all over the place. I'm surprised by it just as everyone else."

Wood carving auction to benefit Owatonna Foundation

BY JONI HUBRED
NEWS EDITOR

Josh Meillier knew something special was happening when he watched visitors at the Steele County Free Fair start moving toward the sound of a chainsaw roaring to life.

Since he connected with Robinson Carving Company, the owner of Alexander Lumber in Owatonna has acquired many of their fair-time creations and donated them to area nonprofits for use in fundraising. This year, the beneficiary is the Owatonna Foundation—and the auction happens Saturday during the fair.

“I watched people just get drawn in,” Meillier said of the woodcarving demos. “They do four shows a day, and each has their own style.”

Stop by Alexander Lumber at 419 N. Cedar Ave., and you’ll get an idea of what the carvings look like—from a short, squat turtle to a sitting giraffe that’s a special favorite with children.

The sculptures are carved from trees, and the artists use chainsaws of varying sizes to create their detailed works. Meillier estimates about 15 will be available by the time the Aug. 19, 5:30 p.m., auction starts.

Alexander Lumber will likely offer delivery for the successful bidders. Meillier said the scul-



STAFF PHOTO BY JONI HUBRED

Josh Meillier, owner of Alexander Lumber, and Owatonna Foundation director Sara McKay stand next to a carved giraffe on display at the store on North Cedar in Owatonna. The giraffe won't be auctioned, but Steele County Free Fair visitors will have an opportunity to bid on other carvings from Robinson Carving Company.

tures can weigh as much as 400 pounds.

The reason the company decided to support the Owatonna Foundation this year, he added, is that “your donation lasts

forever. It goes into a large pot, and the interest from the pot goes toward the grants, so the pot just keeps getting bigger.”

Foundation director Sara McKay said that mes-

sage is now expressed in the organization's new tagline.

“We’re forever funding our future,” she said.

Through a twice-yearly grant cycle, the Owatonna Foundation funds capital

projects that fit with its CARE mission: Community, Arts, Recreation, Education. It also awards thousands of dollars in scholarships for graduating seniors and adults

who want to continue their education.

Learn more about the Foundation at owatonnafoundation.org and about the Steele County Free Fair at scff.org.

High Flying Pages bring exciting aerial act to SCFF

BY JONNY CLUBB
STAFF INTERN

The High Flying Pages will be bringing thrill and excitement to Steele County Free Fair patrons this year, but the act has

been entertaining families around the world for over 30 years.

According to their website, the Pages will be performing stunts on trapeze, as well as on motorcycles inside of a steel cage

that they call the Globe of Death. Shows will also feature leading comedy acts that will offset the thrill and suspense of the show.

America's premier aerial troupe will perform throughout the fair, free of

charge, on the north end of the grandstand. Show times are 6 p.m. on Tuesday, 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. on Wednesday and Thursday, and at 1 p.m., 4 p.m., and 7 p.m. Friday-Sunday.

Deml Heating and Cool-

ing and Fireplace Connection sponsors the act.

The High Flying Pages will be joined by the All-Star Stunt Dogs and Jurassic Kingdom in the North End Entertainment area; those acts are re-

turning from last year.

"We try to keep things fresh," said SCFF manager Scott Kozelka. "It's a new wow not only for kids but for parents and grandparents and all our guests."



The High Flying Pages will perform stunts on trapeze during their thrilling aerial show performed Tuesday-Sunday at the Steele County Free Fair.

PHOTO COURTESY ARTISTS & ATTRACTIONS

Fairgoers 'chew's one taffy for 100 years

BY KAY FATE
STAFF WRITER

If you haven't watched the little mechanical man turn the crank of the taffy puller inside the saltwater taffy trailer, have you actually been to the Steele County Free Fair?

If not, you'll get the opportunity next week, when OZ Concessions brings the chewy confection to Owatonna for the 100th year – with just its second owner.

And like most 100-year-olds, the business has a rich history of friendships and progress, but not as many changes as you might expect.

The first 50

Art Burke, of Springfield, Mo., learned how to make saltwater taffy in 1920 in Atlantic City, N.J.

He brought it back to the Midwest, where the vast number of black walnut trees influenced the first flavor profile.

Burke headed to Minneapolis. During the holiday season, he secured a display window at the FW Woolworth Company. He set up a complete taffy kitchen, making taffy behind the window.

Shoppers would walk down the avenue, watch the candy-making – then step in the door and buy a box.

Burke did a few town festivals that first year, too, in addition to his holiday display, “and somebody told him his product might do well in Owatonna,” said Bill OZ.

So Burke packed up the Arthur C. Burke Taffy

Company and headed south.

“In the early times at the fair, they had a flatbed truck with an ash pole that stood upright in the middle of the truck bed, with a brass hook on it,” OZ said. “Art would hire a couple of strong young men, and they'd take the ball of taffy, throw it up in the air onto the hook, and gravity would pull it down. They'd catch it, throw it up on the hook again and gravity would pull it down. Eventually, it would fold in the air and be chewy.”

would wrap them in wax paper, put them in a bag and sell 20 pieces for 20 cents, OZ said.

“There's a saying in the candy world,” he said. “If you're selling fresh candy, they have to see you make it.”

Friendly competition

Isabelle and Lee Sullivan owned a little candy store on Jackson Street in Anoka.

“People would always say, ‘this is so good – you should sell it other places,’” said OZ. “Then somebody suggested they try the Minnesota State Fair.”



Burke would lay a maple cutting board from the truck to the sales counter and roll out the candy like pastry dough, about five feet long.

Then three women would get to work: The first would use a bar roller – think long rolling pin with pizza cutter wheels at equal intervals – to cut the taffy into long, thin strips. The second would cut it into equal pieces with scissors; the last woman

The couple did, starting in 1952.

The Sullivans were cousins of OZ, “so in high school, I helped them every summer,” he said. “One thing led to another, and college degree or not, every summer my wife and I went out and sold fudge and licorice and taffy.”

The Burkes and the Sullivans were all friends on the southern Minnesota concessions route, OZ said.

“Two people can sell

Coca-Cola and not be mad at each other,” he said. “It's the same way with candy.”

In those early years, Isabelle's Saltwater Taffy and Fudge traveled to 15 or 20 events each summer, including the SCFF.

“Out of mutual respect for the competition and the friendship, Burke's went in and sold only taffy” in Owatonna, OZ said, “and Isabelle's went in and sold only fudge and nut logs, so we didn't step on each other's toes.”

In 1973, Bill and his wife Mary bought the Isabelle business, equipment, and routes. That was their first year at the SCFF.

“It was a no-brainer,” he said. “We enjoyed what we did and thought maybe we could help it grow a little bit.”

The merger(s)

A few years after buying Isabelle's, the couple heard some news.

“One of the Burke children bought or inherited (Art's) business, and found it wasn't what they wanted to do,” OZ said. “They contacted us, and we talked to all the families – nobody was offended or bothered,” so in 1980, the companies merged.

“Art Burke himself was born in 1898,” OZ said, “so he'd had enough of it by 1980.”

The new business was named Isabella Burke's Taffy, he said, “so everybody could look at it and say, ‘you know, that's my heritage.’”

Another new name came along soon enough.

When Bill and Mary married 47 years ago, both



kept their last names. Mary's began with O; Bill's with Z.

About 15 years into their marriage, they adopted two children – who each had their own names already.

“So we went from a family of two to a family of four – with four different last names,” Bill said.

His wife, who has a master's degree in social work, suggested the four share a new last name, offering an assurance of permanence to their children.

“We wanted our two kids to know they'd be our family forever,” Bill said. They'd create the name from the initials of their two last names.

“So it was either Oz or Zo, and Mary said Oz sounded better,” he said. “I told her if I'm taking second-billing, I've got to have a capital letter, too.” OZ, it was.

As their business grew along with the family, it became OZ Concessions.

Keeping the history

After buying Burke's, OZ learned the once-competing taffy recipes were “very similar.”

As they blended the two companies, over the course of about five years, they tweaked the minor differences. The public never noticed the change.

“We didn't want to alienate anyone by chang-

ing tastes” of either of the businesses, OZ said. “We didn't want anyone to say, ‘your taffy doesn't taste like it used to.’”

Besides the slight name and recipe adjustments, not much else has changed.

“Although we upgrade the trailers and keep everything modern,” OZ said, “we still use the machinery, the 15-gallon copper kettle and the recipe that Art Burke put together in 1920. We tell each other it's what our public expects: same ingredients, same recipe, same copper kettle, same machinery.”

But those machines are from the 1890s to the 1930s, so the manufacturers are obviously long since gone.

“They're not making those machines, so we have an informal network of machine shops that have helped us out over the decades,” OZ said. “We were able to obtain some blueprints for two or three of the machines we use most frequently, so we take the broken part to the shop and ask them to make one that's not broken.”

Mary is the most talented at machine maintenance and repair, he said. He and their son, Spencer, also work on them.

They have five trailers that hit the summer festival and fair circuit for eight weeks each year; Mary and Bill each run one, as does Spencer. All three travel to

See **FAIRGOERS** on 38 ►

SCFF, Owatonna Foundation partner for a Great Outdoors Center

◀ SCFF from 11 from Wabasha and RAD Zoo's reptiles and amphibians. Happy Tails Pet Store from Medford will also provide displays.

New this year with a one-day performance is the peregrine falcon program from Mayo Clinic in Rochester.

Kevin Dillemath and Jerome Spindler are the GOC superintendents.

"If they find something that will be of benefit" to the display, they pursue it, Kozelka said. "They're just great ambassadors of the building."

Tim Arlt, treasurer of the Steele County Agricultural Society, is overseeing the projects as the director of the GOC.

In addition to being "great horse traders," Kozelka said of Dillemath and Spindler, they organized meat raffles at the Owatonna Elks and Eagles clubs, in addition to other fundraisers.

"Those charity dollars help fund some of the things in those buildings," he said, contributing to that \$125,000 price tag.

The recent large grants from the Owatonna Foundation for the GOC "have tremendously helped us" set aside money for the repairs, Kozelka said.

The SCFF and the Foundation have had an on-going relationship since 2005, with the first grant of \$375,000 for renovating the Foundation building, close to the



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The outside of the Great Outdoors Center on the west side of the Steele County Fairgrounds has gotten a serious renovation, complete with new siding, windows, displays and more. The Owatonna Foundation provided grants that covered about a third of the costs.

Steele County History Center. Originally built to house horses, it's now rented out for weddings, graduations, business meetings, family reunions, auctions – you name it, Kozelka said.

Like other groups, the SCFF Board submits applications during the Foundation's grant cycles in May and October.

"There's a lot of Q and A with the committee," he said. "They come in for a visit and ask a lot of questions. It shows, just like with other boards, the commitment that we're working together, in tandem, to make sure it's good for our community."

Community is one of four areas the Owatonna Foundation board considers when reviewing grants, said Sara McKay, an Owatonna native who was promoted to director of the organization earlier this month. The other three areas are arts,

recreation and education – which are also part of the GOC.

The Foundation-funded projects would likely not have happened without the grants, Kozelka said, because it's very difficult for a nonprofit to get loans for such large projects, which are critical to the Fair.

"When guests come, we want everything to look nice and be safe," he said. "We want them to enjoy being there."

This year, fairgoers will have a chance to give back to the Foundation.

Kozelka said that Alexander Lumber, which sponsors the wood carving exhibit, has typically taken the items carved during demonstrations at the Fair and donated them to various fundraisers.

This year, on Aug. 19 at the Fair Square stage, the carvings – around 20 in all – will be auctioned off, with all proceeds going to

the Owatonna Foundation.

"When you look at everything the Foundation has done for us, and everything we have at the Fair, it goes hand-in-hand... They help us, and we try to give back the same way," Kozelka said.

He also feels Owatonna, with a population of just around 27,000 – is very fortunate to have a Foundation at all.

"We're pretty unique," he said. "I think the Foundation has an awesome board, with people from all different parts of the community... and it's just gonna get better."

As for the GOC, which was originally built in 1938 as a Works Progress Administration project to help fairgoers connect to the outdoors: It'll be ready for its close-up.

"There are a lot of different highlights, so we're excited," Kozelka said.

"It's beautiful in there."

Morgan back for Friday night show at SCFF

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Grandstand acts

In addition to Morgan, LOCASH, Hairball, and Bulls and Barrels, the grandstand will also hold the FFA Alumni Antique Tractor Pull on Tuesday evening; the show is free.

On Sunday night, the demolition derby will once again close out the fair.

While the SCFF is often considered the last hurrah of summer, the timing sometimes presents a problem, Kozelka said.

"It was hard to get bands," he said. "Where we are on the map, there are all these festivals and casinos and other events around us – and the bands and events have radius clauses."

That means no one else within their specific radius can host them for 45 days before the event,

or for 30 days after.

And because some larger acts can tour with as many as four or five other smaller acts, that limits Kozelka even more.

Casinos, including Mystic Lake, Treasure Island, Diamond Jo's and Turtle Lake, as well as venues such as US Bank Stadium, Target Center, Xcel Energy Center, WE Fest, Winstock and Country Jam, in Eau Claire, Wis., are all popular performing stops.

"We have to get them approved," Kozelka said of any radius clause that may be close, to prove "that we don't believe it will affect them or us. Then the negotiations start."

Like everything else in the past year, the cost of hiring a band has also risen, he said.

"We couldn't do it without our sponsors," Kozelka said.

Fairgoers 'chew's one taffy for 100 years

◀ FAIRGOERS from 37 the Minnesota State Fair.

At the end of the season, the couple – who are from Plymouth, Iowa – store their trailers at a facility there, then spend the winter in San Antonio, Texas.

The second 50

OZ knew the Steele County Free Fair was special right from the start, "from the nature of the community and the management of the fair."

Sprinkle in a little history – "It was the first bona fide event that Art Burke every played," he said – and the next thing you know, 100 years has sailed by.

"It was always successful," OZ said of business at the fair, "and quite frankly, to be able to approach 50 years is phenomenal in a traveling business, to go to the same community for 50 years."

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Big plans ahead for the Steele Saloon

BY JOHNNIE PHILLIPS

The Steele Saloon is set for a complete makeover in 2024 after two anonymous donors supplied the fair board with ample funds to make a permanent building for the establishment.

After opening in 2018, the Steele Saloon has been a tented venue that plays a complementary role to the beer garden but will become its own permanent building on the grounds after construction begins post-fair.

“The fair board had already allotted the money to put cement in this year to go under the tent, but then we received those anonymous donations, and now we’re going to wait to use all of the money next year to make sure we get this done the right way,” said Steele County Free Fair Director Doug Meier.

According to Meier, the size of the building will be a bit bigger than the current tented setup but will remain close in size.

“It will be 40-by-120 feet while the tent is 40-by-105 feet, so it’s just a tad bigger, but that’s just how it lays out to make a building of that size work better,” said Meier.

While additions to the saloon may still be a year out, patrons will still have plenty of reason to be excited about the venue in 2023.

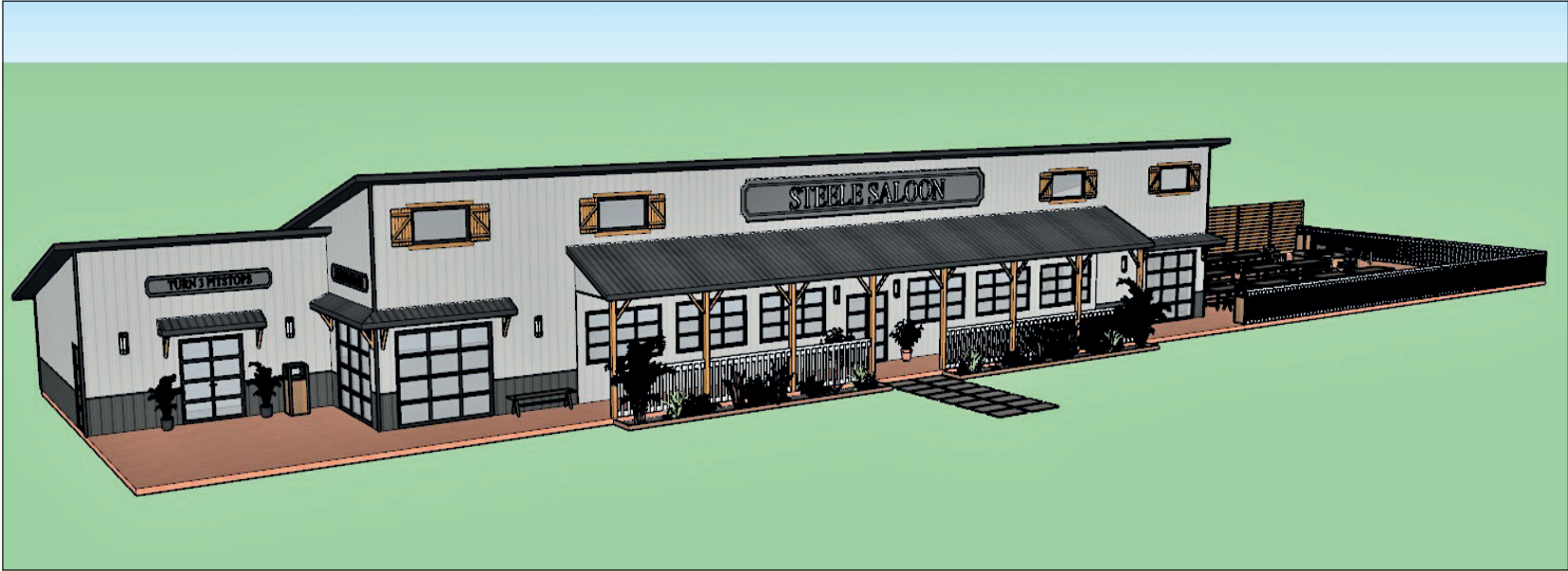


PHOTO COURTESY STEELE COUNTY FREE FAIR BOARD

A drawing portrays the potential design of the Steele Saloon building set to be built in 2024. The Steele County Free Fair received two donations from anonymous parties that gave the fair board a big enough budget to support building a permanent home for the saloon.

The Steele Saloon is currently slated to play host to three of its own events during fair week, while also hosting the return of fan-favorite Midwest All-Star Wrestling for its second annual show in Steele County.

The three events locked in for fair week are an Oktoberfest night with live polka music, a 36-team bean bag tournament, and a euchre tournament.

Oktoberfest will take place in the afternoon on Wednesday, Aug. 16; meanwhile, the bean bag tournament is Saturday, Aug. 19 while the euchre tournament is Sunday, Aug. 20.

According to Meier, the bean bag tournament has already been filled; however, there is room for entry

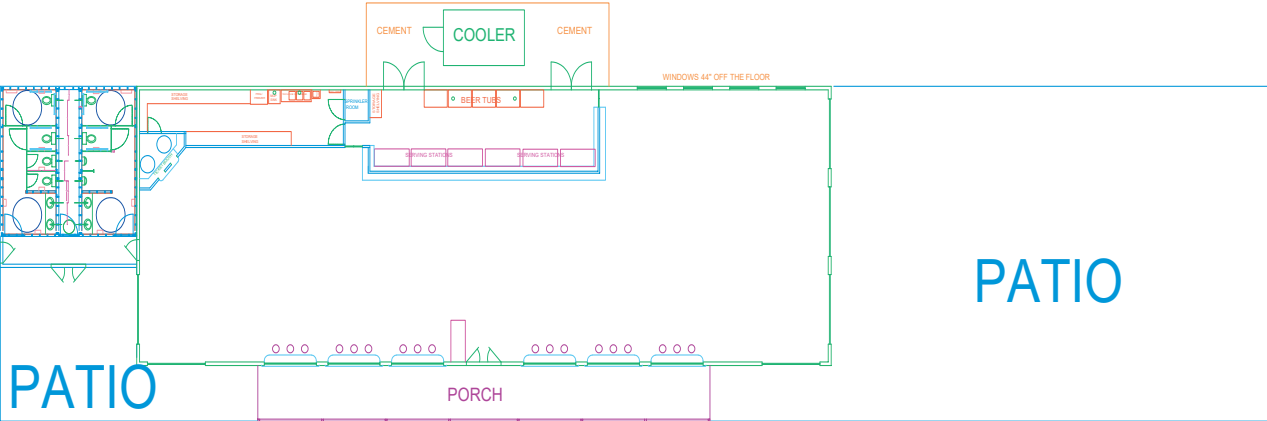


PHOTO COURTESY STEELE COUNTY FREE FAIR BOARD

A blueprint shows the potential floor plan for the Steele Saloon’s new building in 2024. According to Steele County Free Fair Director Doug Meier, the building will be slightly larger than the area of the current Steele Saloon grounds

to the euchre tournament with a buy-in of \$10.

“This thing has just taken off more than I ever expected it would,” said Meier. “To have this other facility is going to be huge because running out of a

tent every night at the fair, you have to lock everything up in a trailer. Now we’ll be able to just clean up, roll down the doors and lock it all up until the morning.”

“This thing has just taken off more than I ever expected it would.”

Doug Meier
Fair Director

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108 West Park Square • Owatonna, MN 55060



SATISFACTION GUARANTEED PHOTO CONTEST

Send in your **BEST** photos of the Steele County Free Fair during this year’s fair and you could win a prize!

FIRST PLACE:
One pair of Chanhassen Dinner Theatre Tickets (\$150 Value)

SECOND PLACE:
Two Pairs of Renaissance Festival Tickets (\$108 Value)

THIRD PLACE:
One-Year Subscription to Steele County Times (\$59 Value)

PLUS ADDED BONUS:
First 6 people to submit entries will receive a **FREE** 3-month subscription (or added onto an existing subscription) to the Times...just for entering!

- Rules:**
- 1. Submit your photography (black and white or color) taken at the 2023 Steele County Free Fair in Owatonna. Email to: news@steelecountytimes.com with “2023 Fair Photo” in the subject line. (Please include your name, address, phone and photo information, if emailing). Yo can also mail to Steele County Times • P.O. Box 247 • Blooming Prairie, MN 55917 or drop off at either the Blooming Prairie Office or Owatonna office (109 W. Rose St.) Please include the contest entry below.
 - 2. Entries must be received by Friday, September 1, 2023. One entry per household. Three winners will be chosen by a panel of judges. Decision by the judges is final.
 - 3. Winner’s photographs will be featured in upcoming edition of Steele County Times and may be used on social media. They may also appear in other promotional pieces by the newspaper.
 - 4. Employees of the newspaper and their immediate families are not eligible. Must be 14 years of age or older to enter.

STEELE COUNTY FREE FAIR PHOTO CONTEST

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____

PHONE: _____

DESCRIPTION OF PHOTO: _____

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STATE REPRESENTATIVE



John Petersburg

Welcome to the Steele County Fair

Prepared and paid for by Petersburg Campaign Committee, 700 19th Ave. NE, Waseca, MN 56093



Steele County Free Fair

Satisfaction Guaranteed in 2023! August 15-20

Tuesday, August 15

Grandstand

6 p.m. FFA Alumni Antique Tractor Pull

Fair Square Stage

5 p.m. Flag Raising Ceremony
6 p.m. Owatonna Community Band
7:30 p.m. Branded

Elmer Reseland Stage

6 p.m. Moogician
7:15 p.m. Electrifying Magic of Jay Mattioli

Village of Yesteryear Stage

6 p.m. Todd & Roger Uptadel

Ye Old Beer Garden

8:30 p.m. Johnny Holm Band

Wednesday, August 16

Grandstand

7 p.m. Locash with Strange Daze

Fair Square Stage

12 p.m. Jeremy Poland & Lantz Dale
2:15 p.m. UPSD Dance Studio
3:15 p.m. Chad Johnson and MN Transplants
5:30 p.m. All Gray's Country Jamboree
7 p.m. Tim Sigler Band

Elmer Reseland Stage

12 p.m. Moogician
2 p.m. Electrifying Magic
3 p.m. Moogician
4:30 p.m. Electrifying Magic
6 p.m. Deal or No Deal

Village of Yesteryear Stage

12 p.m. Nate Page Family Singers
3 p.m. Owatonna String Ensemble

6 p.m. Knights of Columbus Choir

Ye Old Beer Garden

8:30 p.m. IV Play

Thursday, August 17

Senior Day

Grandstand

7 p.m. Hairball Concert

Fair Square Stage

11:30 a.m. Senior Citizen Recognition
12 p.m. Marv Nissel Band
2:30 p.m. Minnesota Over 60 Band
5:30 p.m. JoJo Green
8 p.m. The Whitesidewalls

Elmer Reseland Stage

12 p.m. Moogician
2 p.m. Electrifying Magic
3 p.m. Moogician
4:30 p.m. Electrifying Magic
6 p.m. Deal or No Deal

Village of Yesteryear Stage

12 p.m. Paul Proft Harmonica & Folk Music
3 p.m. Dan Stursa Band
6 p.m. Alan O'Malley-Laursen

Ye Old Beer Garden

8:30 p.m. Jacuzzi Pluma

Friday, August 18

Grandstand

7 p.m. Craig Morgan with Ashley Barron Concert

Fair Square Stage

11 a.m. Rad Zoo
12 p.m. Dan Stursa Band
2:45 p.m. Fender Bender
5:45 p.m. Just Friends
7:15 p.m. Transit Authority

Elmer Reseland Stage

12 p.m. Moogician
1 p.m. Robotics Team
2 p.m. Electrifying Magic
3 p.m. Moogician
4 p.m. Robotics Team
5 p.m. Electrifying Magic
6 p.m. Deal or No Deal

Village of Yesteryear Stage

12 p.m. South East Minnesota Rendezvous Band
3 p.m. Paul Proft Harmonica & Folk Music
6 p.m. Just Kidding-Sweet Adelines

Ye Old Beer Garden

3 p.m. Swerve
8:30 p.m. Shirts & Skins

Saturday, August 19

Grandstand

7:30 p.m. Bulls-N-Barrels

Fair Square Stage

11:30 a.m. Dee Miller
1:30 p.m. Mark Cameron Band
4 p.m. Craig Clark Band
5:30 p.m. Charity Auction
6 p.m. Harrison Street Band
8 p.m. Royal Emperors

Elmer Reseland Stage

12 p.m. Moogician
1 p.m. Robotics Team
2 p.m. Electrifying Magic
3 p.m. Moogician
4 p.m. Robotics Team
5 p.m. Electrifying Magic
6 p.m. Deal or No Deal

Village of Yesteryear Stage

12 p.m. Pumper, Peddler & Politician
3 p.m. Joel Kopp-Folk Music
6 p.m. Lights of Litomysl

Ye Old Beer Garden

3 p.m. Led Penny
8:30 p.m. Travis Thamert Band

Sunday, August 20

Grandstand

2 p.m. Demo Derby

Fair Square Stage

11 a.m. Community Church Service
12:15 p.m. Tai Kwon Do
1:15 p.m. Eclipse
4 p.m. Generation Gap
6:30 p.m. United Way
7 p.m. Owatonna Football/Cheerleader Rally

Elmer Reseland Stage

12 p.m. Moogician
1 p.m. Robotics Team
2 p.m. Greg to Great Magician
3 p.m. Moogician
4 p.m. Robotics Team
5 p.m. Moogician
6 p.m. Greg the Great Magician

Village of Yesteryear Stage

9:30 a.m. Traditional Church Service
12:30 p.m. Dunnell Lenort
3 p.m. Dave Sanders Band

Ye Old Beer Garden

1 p.m. Dan Stursa Band
8:30 p.m. The White Keys

WHAT TO DO IN THE EVENT OF A POWER OUTAGE

Lightning strikes, high winds, fallen tree branches – summer storms can be powerful, but leave us power-less! Rest assured, Owatonna Public Utilities will work non-stop until your power is restored. Here are some things to do in the event of a power outage:



REPORT YOUR OUTAGE.

For fastest outage reporting, log into your SmartHub account (there is a mobile app available). This feeds the information directly into our outage management system. If you don't have a SmartHub account, set one up today by following the link on our homepage. (You will need your utility billing account number.)



KEEP REFRIGERATORS AND FREEZERS CLOSED.

- A refrigerator will keep food cold for about 4 hours if it is unopened.
- A full freezer will keep the temperature for about 48 hours (24 hours for a half full freezer) if it remains closed.



PLAN AHEAD.

- Have alternate plans for refrigerating medicines or using power-dependent medical devices.
- If you need to use a generator, keep it outdoors and away from windows.
- Use surge protectors, or disconnect appliances and electronics to avoid damage from electrical surges.
- Have portable power banks charged and ready for cell phones.
- Prepare an emergency kit with flashlights/candles and a weather radio.



REMEMBER, IF YOU SMELL NATURAL GAS OR HAVE AN EMERGENCY, CALL 911.



View our interactive power outage map at:
www.owatonnautilities.com/outages



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