

Lehigh County Agricultural Society

Founded
1852

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The Great
Allentown Fair

Martin H. Ritter, former president of society operating Allentown Fair, Fairgrounds dies

Fairgrounds Grandstand named in his honor

Allentown, Pa.— The Lehigh County Agricultural Society (LCAS), the nonprofit owner and operator of the Allentown Fairgrounds and the Great Allentown Fair, mourns the loss of its President Emeritus Martin H. Ritter who died today (May 13, 2008) at age 99.

Ritter had long ties to his beloved Great Allentown Fair. His maternal great-grandfather Daniel Beisel served as acting president on January 24, 1852, the day definitive action was taken to form the Lehigh County Agricultural Society (LCAS) to create and operate the annual exposition. His great, great grandfather George Beisel authored the original draft of the Society's constitution. No other individual actively involved in the operation of today's Fair can claim such an astounding, prestigious connection.

When Ritter became involved in the fair over 50 years ago, the young advertising executive and entrepreneur became an enthusiastic LCAS board member, serving and heading up countless committees. With his marketing expertise and love of the arts, he aided Fair President Ed Leidig from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, the time period when the headlining acts at the Grandstand show venue became the calling card for the thousands who visited the Fair.

So impressive were the talent bills of that era, that Ritter dubbed the Grandstand Show venue the "Home of the Stars!" Not only did this mantle aptly fit the renown of the Fair's showcase, the name "stuck" as a lure to the thousands who saw the biggest names in music and comedy grace the stage.

Ritter had countless stories from his “show business” experience. Late night bowling at Allentown’s Livingston Club with cowboy crooner Roy Rogers, much to the chagrin of his wife and singing partner Dale Evans, helping out a young Merv Griffin who overextended himself on carnival games, and booking a relatively unknown Olivia Newton John only to have her star soar in time for her sold-out Fair performances are but a few of the most memorable anecdotes he often related.

During the past half-century, Ritter served the Lehigh County Agricultural Society as a loyal member, board member, vice-president, chairman of the executive committee, general manager and finally as its president from 1980 through 2004. In 1987, he was the first person in Pennsylvania conferred as a Certified Fair Executive by the International Association of Fairs and Expositions.

He led the Pennsylvania State Association of County Fairs from 1983-1984 as its president and was honored as its “Fair Man of the Year” in 1988.

The current Grandstand building was erected in 1911 originally to view horse racing. Today it looms large in the City of Allentown’s skyline as monument to the thrills hundreds of thousands of fairgoers have experienced. On July 29, 2004, the society re-dedicated this building as the Martin H. Ritter Grandstand “Home of the Stars.”

A bronze casting likeness of the society leader is affixed to the east end of the building with these words of distinction—“For a lifetime of tireless dedication and leadership, this edifice is hereby named in honor of Martin H. Ritter, President 1980-2004.”

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