

Sandwiching in History
T. H. Barton Coliseum
10 January 2020
By Callie Williams



Introduction:

Hello, my name is Callie Williams and I am the Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of Barton Coliseum at the Arkansas State Fairgrounds. This tour is worth one hour of continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects, if you would like to receive this credit, please see me or one of my colleagues after the tour to complete a short survey.

The Arkansas State Fair and Livestock Show

The Arkansas State Fair had been held since 1868 on various sites across the state.¹ By 1906, a group of businessmen in Hot Springs organized the Arkansas State Fair Association and held the first well-documented state fair at Oaklawn Park in Hot Springs.² The Hot Springs fair was

¹ C. Dennis Schick, "Arkansas State Fair and Livestock Show," *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/arkansas-state-fair-and-livestock-show-4471/>, (Accessed 1 January 2020).

² Jim Ross and Deb Crow, *The Arkansas State Fair*, Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Company, 2014.

helped in part by the passage of the Amis Law, named after lead sponsor State Senator Amis.³ This law effectively curtailed horse racing throughout the state. This law was seen by most as a retaliation against the powerful national Western Jockey Club, who operated many of the racetracks in Arkansas, after they banned the Arkansan horse breeder and trainer Captain R. R. Rice from competition. The Amis Law did however, allow racing at county fairs, and the Oaklawn racetrack property was provided as a venue for the State Fair for several years free of charge and came with the additional bonus of allowing locals to still race at the track during the fair. After a few successful years, and with the repeal of the Amis Law and the return of horseracing across the state, the Hot Springs fair faltered due to lack of funds. By 1915, the state fair was defunct in Hot Springs.⁴ A few smaller fairs may have taken place in Little Rock in 1916 and 1917, and one state fair was organized in Jonesboro in 1918. In 1920, a group of Little Rock businessmen joined together to bring the State Fair back to Little Rock and a new organization was formed that brought the fair to the Deaf School grounds in large tents (where the Governor's Mansion is today). In 1925, the fair moved again to Fair Park, where War Memorial Stadium is now, and new buildings were constructed through the late 1920s.⁵ By 1930, the State Fair was abandoned again, as the depression took its toll on attendance and profits. From 1931 to 1937 there were no official Arkansas State Fairs. In 1937, a statewide group of businessmen and agricultural leaders organized a new organization to promote diversified agricultural development in Arkansas, with a focus on the promotion of various livestock industries.⁶ This new group became the Arkansas Livestock Show Association and was headed by well-known El Dorado oilman Colonel T. H. Barton. Barton would lead the Livestock Association Show board as President from its founding in 1937 until 1959, just a year before his death. On September 29th, 1952, the mostly complete coliseum, which he helped in many ways to finance, was dedicated as the T. H. Barton Coliseum in his honor.⁷

³ "The Killing of the Amis Racing Bill," *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, Arkansas, 2 April 1905, p 20. "Senator Amis Offers Bill," *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock, Arkansas, 22 March 1907, p 3.

⁴ Jim Ross and Deb Crow, *The Arkansas State Fair*, Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Company, 2014.

⁵ Callie Williams, "War Memorial Stadium," Script for the July 2019 Sandwiching in History Program, files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, Little Rock, Arkansas.

⁶ C. Dennis Schick, "Arkansas State Fair and Livestock Show," *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/arkansas-state-fair-and-livestock-show-4471/>, (Accessed 1 January 2020).

⁷ "He Was Not A Farmer, But He Believed Livestock Could Bring the State Prosperity," *Arkansas Gazette*, 28 September 1952, p 2G.

Colonel Thomas Harry Barton

Thomas Harry “T.H.” Barton was born in Texas in 1881, he eventually entered Texas A&M College but only studied for a year and a half before dropping out due to a lack of funds.⁸ He enlisted in the US Army in 1901, was discharged in 1904 as a corporal and then worked for several years in the banking and lumber industry in Dallas County, Arkansas. In 1906, he was commissioned as a Captain in the Arkansas National Guard. At the outbreak of World War I, he became a captain in the regular army and spent most of the war training cavalry regiments in Texas. He was discharged again in 1919 with the rank of major. He remained in the Army reserve after his war service until 1936, when he finally retired from service with the rank of colonel. In 1921, as the poster child for being in the right place at the right time, Barton arrived in El Dorado just days after oil was discovered in the region. He quickly organized a new natural gas and oil company and sold it for a large profit in 1929. During this same period, he also became the principal stockholder in the struggling Lion Oil Company. In 1929, he became Lion Oil’s president, and soon Lion Oil was responsible for the discovery of several new major oil fields in southwest Arkansas. By 1937, Lion Oil employed over 3,000 people and sold its products at 2,000 service stations across the South. Lion Oil merged with the Monsanto Chemical Corporation in 1955, and Barton continued to serve on the Board of Directors of Monsanto until his retirement in 1959. He passed away on the 24th of December, 1960.

The Livestock Show Association returns to Little Rock

In 1938, the Arkansas Livestock Show Association held its first annual State Fair and Livestock Show in North Little Rock on empty land near the intersection of 5th and Smothers near where the Sherman Park Recreation Center is today.⁹ As of a few years ago, one of the original 1940s show buildings was still visible from the street. This first fair was poorly attended due to rain which resulted in nearly \$20,000 of debt for the association. Colonel Barton stepped in and paid the debt so the association could continue planning the fair for 1940. The next two fairs were

⁸ Don Lambert and John G. Ragsdale, “Thomas Harry Barton (1881-1960), *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/thomas-harry-barton-1586/>, (Accessed 1 January 2020).

⁹ Jim Ross and Deb Crow, *The Arkansas State Fair*, Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Company, 2014.

also held in North Little Rock, and were successful and featured a rodeo and even brought in celebrities, like a young Roy Rogers. Unfortunately, the fair was dealt a huge blow in 1941 when the large rodeo stadium and cattle barn on the fairgrounds was devastated by fire the night after the fair closed. The loss of the stadium and nearly 100 head of prime cattle was a devastating financial blow to the young organization. Again, they picked up the pieces under the leadership of Colonel Barton and held the 1942 fair in North Little Rock in large tents. In 1943, the fairground was commandeered by the military and the fair was moved to the fairgrounds in Pine Bluff for a year. During the following two years, in 1944 and 1945, the fair was canceled due to the war and various issues with finding a new permanent site.

By 1945, the livestock association had found their new location in Southwest Little Rock along Roosevelt Road and the state legislature had been convinced to provide funding to help with the construction of several purpose built fair buildings on the new site as a way to help promote the growing livestock industry in Arkansas. In 1946, the first show and fair on the current site was held in a temporary rodeo arena and in large tents. Soon after the close of the 1946 fair, new modern show buildings were planned for construction for beef cattle and dairy cows, 2 buildings each, as well as a separate show building for pigs. By 1948, these new show buildings were complete and construction was underway on the central outdoor rodeo coliseum, which would eventually be transformed into the current enclosed coliseum.¹⁰

The T. H. Barton Coliseum

Originally referred to as the rodeo arena and then as the rodeo coliseum, the structure that would rise at the center of the new state fairgrounds was an echo of the old rodeo stadium that was lost to fire at the North Little Rock fair location in 1941. The rodeo was an early major draw for crowds at the fair and the ticket sales helped to underpin the livestock shows. However, the early rodeos and livestock shows were constantly plagued by rain and general bad weather. Creating a space that could be shielded from the elements was seen as a desperate need for the growing fairgrounds. Also, the memory of the disastrous rain in 1938 that almost destroyed the fair's future before it had a chance to get off the ground was surely a factor in the decision to

¹⁰ "Livestock Show Edition," special edition insert, *Arkansas Gazette*, 2 October 1949.

build what would become Barton Coliseum. By 1947, money was secured from the state legislature and other investors to build 6 new buildings, two cattle barns, two dairy cow barns, 1 pig barn, and the rodeo venue. By show time in 1948, the animal barns were complete, but cement shortages slowed the work on the rodeo arena.¹¹ In 1949, the outdoor arena, which featured two wings of tiered seating and temporary seat infills at either end, was ready for its first fair rodeo. This stadium also echoed the larger, just completed War Memorial Stadium in Fair Park, once home to the State Fairgrounds.

Again, rain struck the fair and the 1949 rodeo was delayed at least twice and eventually reduced in scope due to the thick mud throughout the arena.¹² After the 1949 fair, construction continued on the next phase of the coliseum, the roof. By early June of 1950, several of the large curved steel beams were in place for the roof structure under the direction of the Baldwin Construction Company, the parent firm of today's Baldwin and Shell, who served as the general contractor for the project.¹³ Progress was halted, however, when on June 7th, 1950, a crane that was being used to lift the beams into place fell over due to shifting soil beneath its footings; causing major damage to several beams and a section of concrete tiers and several rows of newly installed seats.¹⁴ Luckily, none of the dozen or so workers in the area of the collapse were seriously hurt, with only one worker being treated for a sprained ankle before returning to work later in the day. This crane collapse resulted in a severe delay and the full aluminum clad roof, using only Arkansas aluminum, was finished just days before the state fair of 1950 by the local firm of Ketcher & Company.¹⁵ This new roof made the structure the largest clear span aluminum-roofed building in the United States. At the 1950 state fair rodeo, then Governor McMath noted during a speech that "we're going to complete this big structure."¹⁶ The structure still lacked an exterior paved concourse behind the stands, the outside walls, and all of the amenities such as restrooms and air conditioning.

¹¹ "Cement Shortage To Handicap Projects," *Camden News*, 9 September 1948, p 7.

¹² "State Livestock Show Hit By Rain," *Camden News*, 4 October 1949, p 2.

¹³ 1951 State Fair Program, Arkansas Fairs and Festivals Collection, BC.MSS.00.11, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Little Rock, Arkansas.

¹⁴ "Stock Show Stadium Girders Fall," *Arkansas Democrat*, Evening Edition, 7 June 1950, p 1.

¹⁵ Advertisement for Ketcher & Company, *Arkansas Democrat*, 28 September 1952, p 15B.

¹⁶ "Press Day Held At State Stock Show at Capital," *Blytheville Courier News*, 5 October 1950, p 5.

In 1951, plans were made to complete the exterior brick and tile walls of the building, and the State Livestock Association voted to name the building in honor of Colonel Barton for his years of hard work in leading and promoting the association and the annual state fair and livestock show.¹⁷ When dedicated in 1952, the arena was noted by local newspapers as being “the finest arena in the south” with only 4 arena’s in the nation being larger; those in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco. It still lacked some finishing touches such as the concrete in the concourse area, the catwalks for theatrical performances, air-conditioning, and heating. The brick and tile exterior was designed by the local architectural firm of Erhart, Eichenbaum, and Rauch, architects of Little Rock.

The final cost in 1952 was set at just over 750,000 with an additional 500,000 noted as being needed to finish out the building with all the needed amenities. By 1953, it was noted in local newspaper reports that Colonel Barton had again invested his own money and installed flooring for the arena that would allow basketball games to be played in the building. Barton Coliseum would soon become an important local center for basketball, and sports in general, serving as the home court for the Arkansas-Little Rock Trojans basketball team, the defunct Arkansas GlacierCats of the Western Professional Hockey League, and the defunct Arkansas Impact of the Premier Basketball League. It also hosted several Sun Belt Conference men’s basketball tournaments. Interesting note: In the early 20th century, basketball was sometimes referred to as the “cage game” due to the use of wire or rope cages that sometimes enclosed the court, which meant that the ball never went out of bounds.¹⁸ The cages were most often used in the Northeast United States and were abandoned by the early 1930s.

By 1960, with the building completed, the final cost was tallied as 1,100,224.18 from state funding and 150,000.00 from Colonel Barton.¹⁹ The building campaign was summed up best by an Arkansas Gazette reporter who stated that:

¹⁷ “State Livestock Show Changes,” *Camden News*, 26 February 1950, p 7. “High-Heeled Boots Prevail at Opening Of State Stock Show Event,” *Blytheville Courier News*, 1 October 1951, p 9.

¹⁸ “When The Court Was A Cage,” *Sports Illustrated*, 11 November 1991, <https://www.si.com/vault/1991/11/11/125381/when-the-court-was-a-cage-in-the-early-days-of-pro-basketball-the-players-were-segregated-from-the-fans>.

¹⁹ “The Coliseum: Little Rock and Arkansas Have Every Reason to Be Proud of Their Big Arena,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 March 1960, Sunday Magazine.

“It started with a section of bleachers, and then another section. Later, an aluminum canopy was added, supported by naked steel beams around the outside of the bleachers. Just a roof, no walls. In time the walls were put up. And over the years a heating and cooling system was installed, the building sealed, and a concrete floor laid.”²⁰

Concerts come and go at Barton Coliseum

After nearly a decade of constant use by rodeos, basketball teams, local and state animal shows, and various other events; the Barton Coliseum started a new tradition of hosting headliner concerts throughout the year. In November of 1963, the first large scale concert not associated with the fair was held; featuring the *Sam and Dave Review and Dance*, an African American R&B duo who were eventually inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and were the originators of the song “Soul Man” in 1967.²¹ “Soul Man” would later be the go to single for *The Blues Brothers* of Saturday Night Live fame. Barton Coliseum, as the largest indoor event venue in the state, became the place to see big name bands through the 1970s and 1980s. General admission tickets sometimes were available for as little as 4.00 dollars. During the 1970s, there were pushes by stadium staff to keep the concerts safe and new regulations were put in place to limit smoking in the arena and keep people mostly in or near their seats.²² In 1999, with the opening of the larger Alltel Arena (now known as the Simmons Bank Arena), many concerts and sporting events were moved to the newer and larger arena across the river in North Little Rock.

By 2012, Barton Coliseum had been the venue for over 525 major concerts from bands ranging from country western, to rap, to R&B, to soul, to heavy metal, to beach rock. The following list of bands and performers is not inclusive, but shows the breadth of talent and styles that performed in this space. Also the following list doesn’t include any artist that performed at any

²⁰ “The Coliseum: Little Rock and Arkansas Have Every Reason to Be Proud of Their Big Arena,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 27 March 1960, Sunday Magazine.

²¹ Concert list compiled by the state of the Old State House Museum, 2019-2020 State Fair Exhibit materials.

²² “Backstage at Barton Coliseum: A staple in Arkansas rock 'n' roll history,” THV11 report, 19 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GA8I78AJC70&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3IrrzMvT4pZ2maa5QVsc7d9BnijjokFv5mPR63MZk6OgmfyFYvAkWIWI>.

of the annual State Fairs. In no particular order concerts held in Barton Coliseum included: Jimmy Buffett, KISS, Loretta Lynn, Kool & the Gang, Tina Turner, Black Sabbath, The Monkees, Black Sabbath, Bon Jovi, AC/DC, Elton John, Def Leppard, Hall & Oates, Barry Manilow, Judas Priest, Jefferson Starship, Rush, M. C. Hammer, Garth Brooks, Herman's Hermits, B. B. King, Van Halen, The Beach Boys, Journey, Peter Frampton, Fleetwood Mac, Earth Wind & Fire, Aerosmith, Elvis, Willie Nelson, Milli Vanilli, Johnny Cash, Metallica, Tom Jones, George Strait, The Eagles, Boyz II Men, Marilyn Manson, Reba McEntire, Amy Grant, Sir Mix-A-Lot, John Denver, James Brown, Grand Funk Railroad, STYX, Merle Haggard, Black Oak Arkansas, Ike & Tina Turner, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Three Dog Night, Sonny & Cher, The Jackson Five, Ray Charles, ZZ Top, Little Richard, Lynyrd Skynyrd, REO Speedwagon, Dolly Parton, The Doobie Brothers, Neil Diamond, and Pearl Jam.

One famous Arkansas rock groupie known to frequent Barton Coliseum was "Sweet Sweet Connie", or Connie Hamzy Parente of Little Rock, who's adventures as a groupie during the 1970s was featured in the song "We're an American Band" by *Grand Funk Railroad*, who played Barton Coliseum in 1973 and 1975.²³ The song was written in July of 1973, and featured the line "Last night in Little Rock, put me in a haze / Sweet, sweet Connie, doin' her act / She had the whole show and that's a natural fact" in reference to their show in Little Rock in February of 1973. She was later profiled in *Cosmopolitan* in 1974 after the song rose to #1 on the US charts.

On October 20th, 1977, Ronnie Van Zant, Steve Gaines, and Cassie Gaines, members of the band Lynyrd Skynyrd, were killed in a plane crash in Mississippi. They were on their way to Baton Rouge to perform at Louisiana State University, before travelling to Little Rock for a concert at Barton Coliseum on October 23rd. Lynyrd Skynyrd had previously played at Barton Coliseum and the concert was sure to be a sell-out. The concert was cancelled and many who had purchased early tickets returned them for a refund. In the recent search through Barton Coliseum for historical items, a stash of original tickets from the cancelled concert were found and will be

²³ "Arkansas Woman Mentioned in Hit Song," THV11 news report, 18 November 2019, <https://www.thv11.com/article/features/sweet-sweet-connie-doin-her-act/91-aaa77726-bf8c-4b59-8bfc-74810621bf9d>.

on display at the Old State House Museum's upcoming tour on the history of the Arkansas State Fair and the fairgrounds. A previous of this upcoming exhibit can be seen in a gallery at the Old State House Museum now with a larger exhibit to come later in the year. The Old State House Museum staff is also still on the lookout for special State Fair related materials to feature in their exhibit. If you have historic materials related to the fair that may be of interest, you can contact the curators at the Old State House Museum.

In the last few years, the interior lighting was changed over to LED, the bathrooms were updated and the basketball floor was refurbished. The next big events at the coliseum include the Big Buck Classic at the end of January, the Garden Brothers Circus in early February, the Arkansas Flower and Garden Show in late February, and the First Robotics Rock City Regional competition in early March.

This concludes the history presentation of Barton Coliseum. Again, I'd like to thank you all for coming and feel free to check out our selection of historic images of the construction of Barton Coliseum and information from the upcoming Old State House exhibit on the Arkansas State Fair in the lobby. Also, please feel free to pick up a blank note-card and share with us your favorite Barton Coliseum memory. I will be in the lobby area after we finish up to answer questions.

Our next Sandwiching in History tour will be at the Quaker Meeting House, formerly the Anderson House, located at 3415 West Markham Street in Little Rock on Friday, February 7th, at Noon. We also have brochures for all of this year's Sandwiching and Walks Tours, please be sure to grab one and join us throughout 2020 as we explore more interesting historic sites throughout central Arkansas.