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Our Great State Fair

OKLAHOMA'S best-attended showcase opens its gates Friday for a 10-day gala that may attract more than 1.5 million visitors. The State Fair of Oklahoma ranks among the top five fairs in the nation in quality, in attendance, and financially.

While it essentially is an Oklahoma event, the fair attracts exhibits from other nations, some of the best nationally known entertainment features, displays of products and innovations from almost every state, and visitors from everywhere.

Credit for bringing together all these attractions must go to O.O. "Sandy" Saunders, president and general manager, and his capable staff of experts and workers. By the time one fair closes they are working to make the next one bigger and better.

Credit for making their accomplishments possible should go to a far-sighted group of Oklahoma City business leaders who, several years before statehood, organized and operated the first fairs on downtown streets. There was no fairgrounds then, but they soon acquired property on the east side of the city and built one.

Besides their enthusiasm and efforts, these leaders made another significant contribution that in a real sense and large measure accounts for the continuing success of the State Fair of Oklahoma. They established it as an independent cooperative enterprise; not as a tax supported institution requiring annual appropriations, as is the case with the majority of state fairs.

Through the years the fair has drawn into service many of the

state's most capable civic leaders, people who might not have been available for politically controlled activities. They were not looking for paid appointments and they received no remuneration for their skills, management and promotion.

Until about 30 years ago the fair owned and maintained its own facilities. At that time the Fair Board cooperated with public schools, Oklahoma State University and other agencies in a move that resulted in locating the state fair on Oklahoma City park property.

Most of the buildings have been built with income from prior fairs and contributions. An exception is the State Fair Arena, which was financed by a bond issue to provide 4-H and FFA members with adequate facilities for the spring stock show, the fair with an entertainment arena, and a place for other year-around events.

The Fair Board looks farther ahead than the next fair. A two-year construction program adopted last January and approved by the City Council calls for \$2.49 million in fairgrounds improvements. It will be paid for with state fair income, including a \$2-million exhibit hall planned as part of an expansion to accommodate the 1989 celebration of the centennial of Oklahoma's famous land rush.

The day is long past when a person could spend a day at the State Fair of Oklahoma and claim that he had seen it all. If only a day is available, it may be well spent at the fair — for entertainment, education and information.