

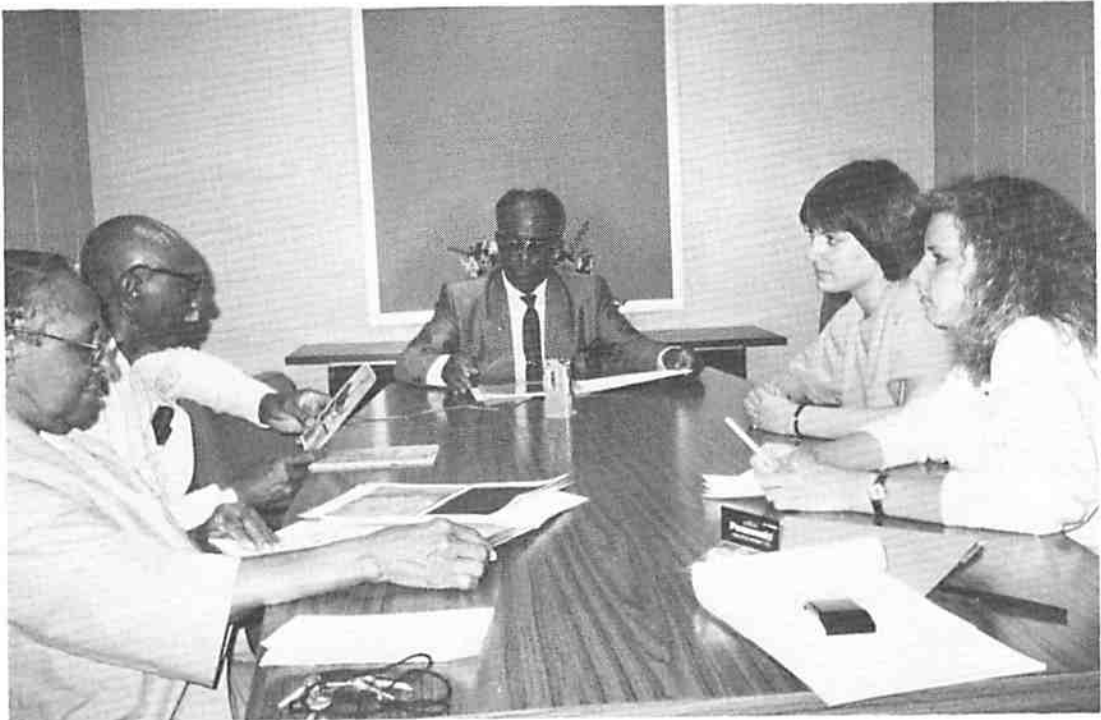
A Proud Moment For Black 4-H.

(History of a Separate Fair)

— Staff —

Few people who wander through the exhibits at the fair today, realize that there was a separate black fair which took place in September each year from 1949 until integration in the early 1960's. In an extensive interview with Mr. James Forrest, his wife, Harriet, and John Lancaster, much light was shed on the days of old.

"The first black fair was held at the Cardinal Gibbons High School in Ridge, Maryland, in 1949", said Forrest, the past president of the St. Mary's County Board of Education and past president of the county's Black Fair. Cardinal Gibbons High School was the first black high school in St. Mary's County. "We had a Farmer's and Homemaker's Association which was an organization of local farmers and homemakers whose purpose was to teach farmers how to grow their food better, how to sew, can food, and raise healthier animals. Most of this was done through the homemaker's club; then the idea came about to combine the farmers and the homemakers knowledge and understanding toward developing a quality product," said John Lancaster, a County Extension Agent during the Black Fair years.

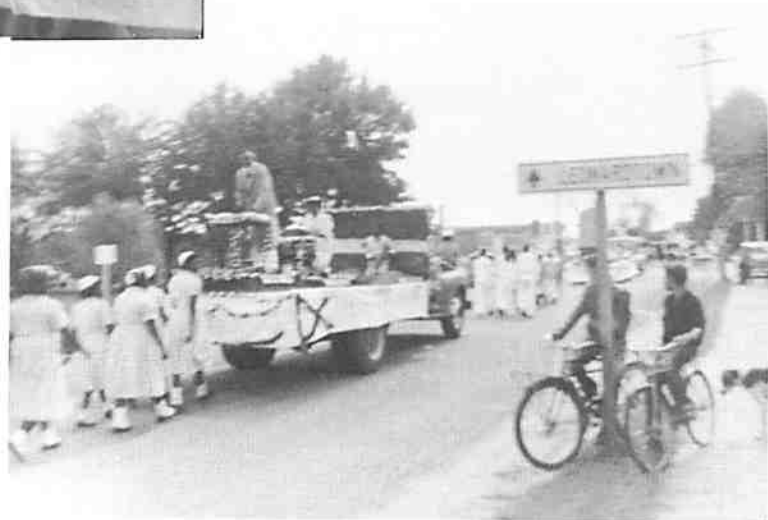


John Lancaster (center), County Extension Agent for Agriculture and Black 4-H during the years of integration; James Forrest (second from left), Past President of the St. Mary's County Board of Education and Past President of the Black Fair; and Mrs. Forrest (left), who along with her husband was very active with their children in 4-H, explain what took place in and around Black Fair week. Right: Shannon Rhodes — 2nd From Right: Laurel Potyem

"The idea was to increase the quality of life--to improve the standard of living," stated Forrest. "John had the knowledge and know-how to instruct us. By combining the 4-H clubs with the homemakers, we were able to move towards that goal. People brought their corn, tobacco, hogs, chickens, canned goods, etc., and there were a few thoroughbred horses."

"The fair was moved from Cardinal Gibbons to Loveville. We held it on the Bernard Somerville property in a tent. The last fair we had at Loveville was ruined by rain so we negotiated in the 1950's with the St. Mary's County Fair Board to allow us to use the fairgrounds on Route 5. The whites held their fair one week and we held ours the next," related Forrest.

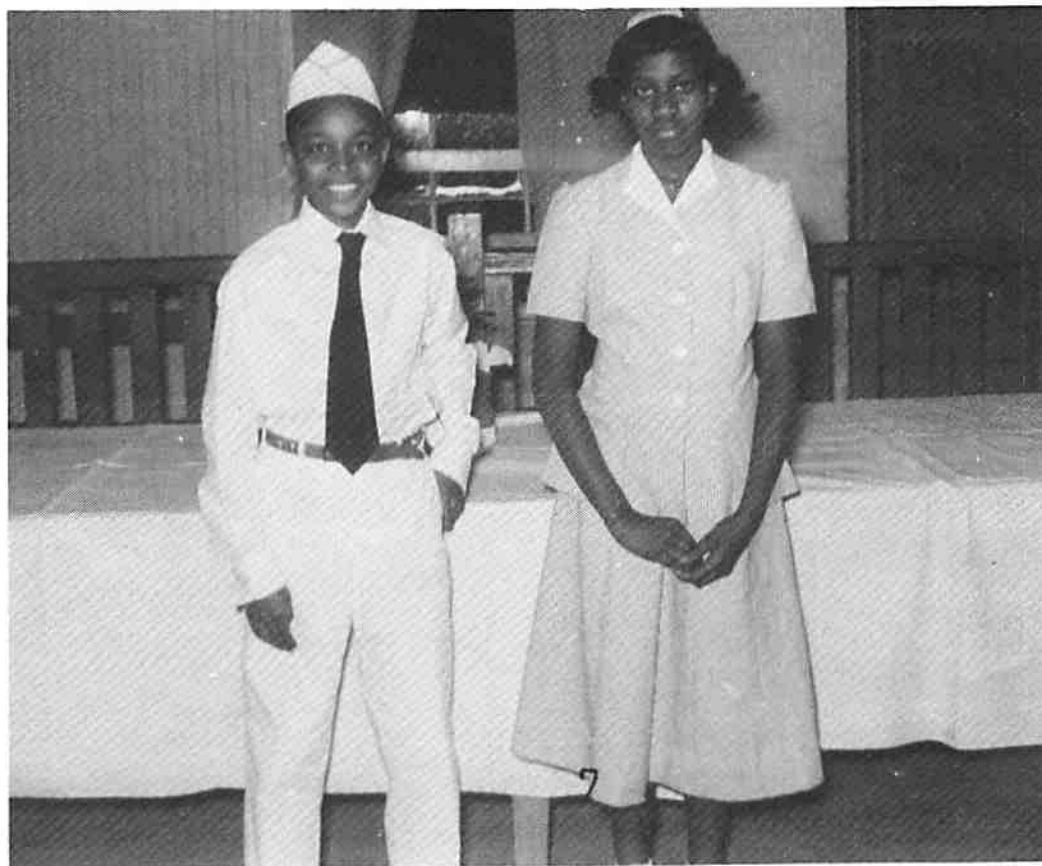
According to Mrs. Harriet Forrest, "we had a Miss 4-H of St. Mary's County who was chosen from the various black 4-H groups in the county. We would have eight or nine girls from which the queen was chosen. We had a big ceremony on Sunday for the crowning of the queen and her court. Our parade had more participants than the white fair; we always had a nice parade. Our bands were from out of the county.



The Black Fair's Educational Float was one of many floats and bands which moved from St. Mary's Academy around the square and on to buses which took them to the fairgrounds. (Photos courtesy James and Harriet Forrest)

Leonardtown had no band at the time; we used to get the Bates High School Band from Annapolis, and many others. We also had the Cardinal Gibbons Drum and Bugle Corps. When that parade went through Leonardtown, it was something! People would really come out to watch the parade. Our floats were simply beautiful."

"Our 4-H'ers wore uniforms. The boys wore white pants and white shirts and the girls wore green-striped dresses. We used to have more youth participation: the young people used to work together back then. Then when the fair was integrated in the 1960's few young people participated. They still don't," said Mrs. Forrest.



(L) Louis Forrest (son of James and Harriet Forrest of Leonardtown), and Jean Fenwick (R) pose during 4-H event. The 4-H uniforms consisted of white pants and white shirt with green tie for boys and green and white striped dresses for girls. (Photos courtesy James and Harriet Forrest)

"The financing for our fair was partly from the Maryland Agriculture Fair Board. They paid for ribbons and awards for the children. We, in turn, had to report everything to the state fair board: gate receipts, fee for rental of ground and any other money transactions," related Mrs. Forrest. "We had our own fair catalogue and sold ads to pay for it."

"Our judges for the exhibits were from the University of Maryland who were specialists in their area, agronomists, etc," stated John Lancaster, former County Extension Agent for the University of Maryland. "It is still done the same way today."

"Once the black fair was integrated with the white fair, the blacks lost their leadership roles. We used to go out and get our own ads and run our own exhibits and organize everything. We had our own catalogue which was a lot of work; it took leadership and organization to put one out," said James Forrest. "When Frank Guy went out of the printing business, all the fair books were put together and given to Rayetta McWilliams, who is still a member of the St. Mary's County Fair Board today."

"Today's young people aren't interested much in 4-H," stated James Forrest. "When I was young, we raised chickens, had to sell the eggs - door to door."



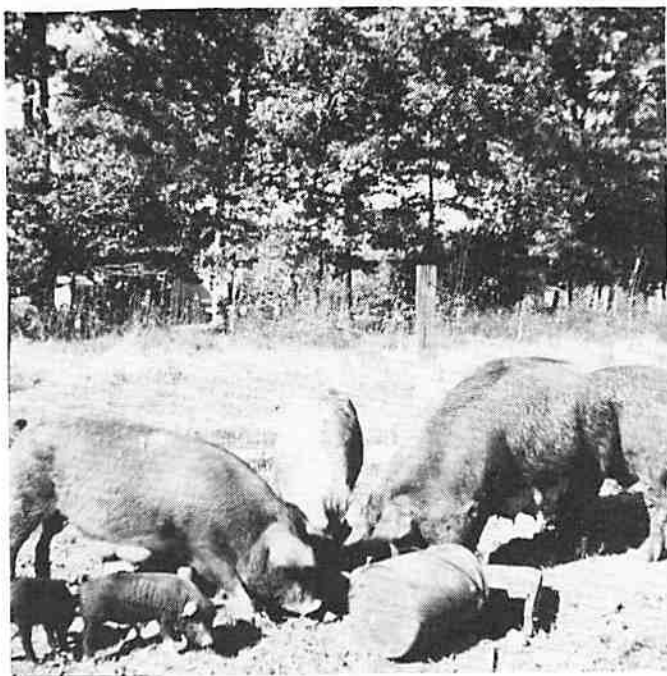
Louis Forrest (son of James and Harriet Forrest of Loveville) poses with the 150 chicks he raised for a 4-H Club project. (Photo courtesy James and Harriet Forrest)

"We had poultry contests and you could really see the difference in the ones that were raised properly. Our goal was to compete against ourselves - to do a better job each year. If I hadn't been in 4-H, I wouldn't be where I am today. I joined when I was ten years old."

Lancaster explained that "the children were taught public speaking, as well as life skills in the black fair. The 4-H leaders would go into the home and teach the children skills. It was important for them to learn how to be out in front of the public. They would go on trips to Washington, have dance contests, etc. "We made youth responsible for self," said Lancaster.

"The black 4-H'ers would go for a week to a state 4-H Camp each year held at Princess Ann College on the Eastern Shore. There a group picture was taken of them in uniform. They had classes every day in cooking, sewing, etc.," explained Harriet Forrest.

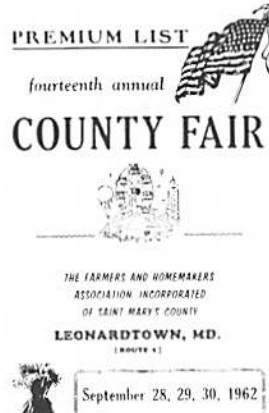
"After integration of the fairs, the black participation wasn't there. They couldn't compete--their fair wasn't offering what ours was offering," said Mrs. Forrest. "For example, I would grow my flowers in my yard--not in a hot house--why enter mine when I couldn't compete." Lancaster reflected, "Purebred hogs are going to be above what ours were; they were given vitamins and supplements--we didn't have any purebred hogs."



"They gave my son, George, one hog (a sow) and he had to raise it and her piglets for a 4-H Project." (Photos 1961 courtesy James and Harriet Forrest)

"We're not blaming anyone," said James Forrest, "that's just the way things were. All the leadership the blacks had just fell away. From the early 1960's blacks faded away and participated less. The naval base came in, farming began to dwindle, jobs became more available and everything has changed along with it."

Black Fair Catalog Covers



The Black Fair was held on the fairgrounds one week after the white fair until integration in 60s. The Black Fair was first held on the grounds of the Cardinal Gibbons High School then it was moved to Loveville and eventually to the current fairgrounds. (See article pages 66 - 70)

Fair catalog covers courtesy James Forrest, fair board member.