

Portland Expo Center – History

The Portland Expo Center has a rich cultural past that has touched the lives of many Portlanders and visitors throughout its history. From its utilitarian beginnings as a livestock exhibition hall to the sprawling swap meets and high-action roller derbies of today, Expo has grown and changed form with function throughout the years, but has always maintained the indispensable role it plays to serve both the Portland community and the Pacific Northwest region.

The Portland Expo Center continues to provide a diverse array of events and experiences for today through its combination of old and new buildings conveniently located along Interstate 5 and the region's light rail system.

1920s – 1950s: Pacific International Livestock Association

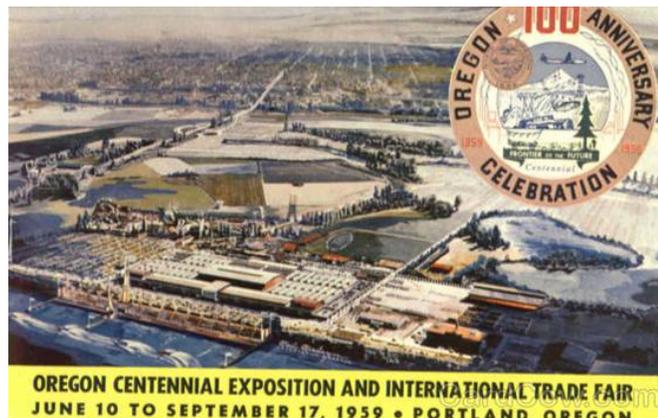
While the facility began operating in the capacity as an exposition hall in 1965, the complex of buildings was originally constructed as livestock exhibition halls under the auspices of the Pacific International Livestock Association in 1921. Three years later, the complex of buildings burned to the ground but was rebuilt in 1925. To this day, Halls A and B continue as 84,000 square feet of rentable space.

Expo served the North Portland Stockyards and nearby meat processing plants through the 1950s as a livestock exposition center, cattle grading center, auction facility and venue for first-class rodeos. In the 1930s it was the largest livestock exhibition center on the West Coast.

1959: Oregon Centennial Exposition and International Trade Fair

In 1959, the Portland Expo Center was selected as the location of the Oregon Centennial Exposition and International Trade Fair to commemorate one hundred years of statehood.

Over 100 days, nearly 1.5 million visitors enjoyed 65 acres of exhibits and entertainment along the Columbia River in settings titled the Gayway Amusement Park, International Garden of Tomorrow, Adventureland, Indian Village, and one of the most popular attractions, Frontier Village, where visitors watched daily gunfights from the Old West of 1870.





President Richard Nixon was the keynote speaker and actor Raymond Burr was the master of opening ceremonies. Audiences enjoyed performances by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans and their horse, Trigger, Harry Belafonte, Lawrence Welk, and Merle Travis, and CBS-TV broadcasted "Art Linkletter's House Party" live from the site.

Construction for the 1959 Oregon Centennial event was the first rebuilding to occur in the Vanport area nearly 11 years after the city's destruction. The city encompassed a low-lying area where the Exposition center and nearby parks are now located. Vanport was destroyed during a flood caused by a failed dike along the Columbia River Slough in 1948 claiming the lives of 15 individuals.



Portland Assembly Center

During World War II, the Portland Expo Center temporarily ceased operation as a livestock exposition facility. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, allowing the exclusion of any person from a designated military area, and local leaders transformed the complex into the Portland Assembly Center in order to house 3,500 detained Japanese-Americans before their transfer to internment camps in Idaho and California.



Throughout five months, families and individuals endured living conditions similar to the livestock before them. Many hailed from surrounding agricultural areas and some descendants continue to operate farms throughout the Willamette Valley and Eastern Oregon today.

Portland artist Valerie Otani created the *Torii Gate* to honor of those housed at the Portland Assembly Center and to serve as a reminder of this sad chapter in our nation's history.

Only one structure built for the 1959 celebration exists today. In nearby Kenton reigns a 31-foot statue of Paul Bunyan, which was constructed to greet visitors entering the gates of the Centennial Exposition and International Trade Fair. It was recently placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

1960 – 1990s: Multnomah County Fair and Exhibition

As the livestock industry began to shift and as North Portland developed into commercial and residential neighborhoods, the business focus of the Portland Expo Center changed. In 1965, Multnomah County



purchased the facility and a year later, consolidated its operations with the County Fair, which, until that time, operated at a site in Gresham.

In 1970, Expo hosted the first Multnomah County Fair on its ground and continued to do so until early 1990. Consumer/trade shows gained in popularity and became a primary focus of the center. Portland Meadows Racetrack was also operated by Expo which grew in popularity as well. By 1990, the lack of capital investment by its owners presented the community with a series of aged buildings unable to compete with other, newer facilities such as the Oregon Convention Center.

1994 – 2004: Metro reinvestment and revitalization

In 1994, Multnomah County transferred ownership of the Portland Expo Center to Metro regional government, and in 1997, Metro, through its Metropolitan Exposition Recreation Commission, began a steady tenure of strong business leadership and capital investments. Hall E, a new 108,000 square foot exhibition space, offering modern amenities and lobby/meeting rooms, opened in 1997, allowing Expo to position itself as the largest consumer show complex on the West Coast. Its inaugural event welcomed nearly 425,000 visitors to the Smithsonian Institution's Traveling America Exhibit.



A vision planning document “Expo: A Vision for the Future” was developed during the planning and construction of Hall E and called for a complete replacement of Expo’s four remaining buildings, Halls A, B, C and D, with newer facilities to meet customers’ needs. In 2001, a newly rebuilt Hall D opened offering 112,000 total square feet including 72,000 square feet of column-free exhibit space, a commercial kitchen, a large light-filled lobby and seven meeting rooms.

Phase III improvements identified by the Portland Expo Center Conditional Use Master Plan and are included in Expo’s master planning process currently underway.

2004 – Present: Expo competes as a leader in sustainability

The Portland Expo Center became the northern-most destination on the region’s light rail train (called Metropolitan Area Express or “MAX”) with the opening of the MAX Yellow Line in 2004. Long-range regional transit plans call for an extension of the Yellow Line past Expo and across the Interstate Bridge linking Oregon and Washington. In the meantime, Expo continues to serve as one of the premier destinations for corporate meetings, special events and large consumer/trade shows on the west coast. It was designated “Recycle at Work” certified by the



City of Portland and consistently meets stringent recycling/diversion goals each year.



The *Torii Gate*, designed by Portland artist Valerie Otani, stands at the entrance to the Portland Expo Center from the MAX Yellow Line station. 3,500 identification tags are used in the installation to represent the same number of Japanese-Americans housed at the Portland Assembly Center located at Expo during World War II.