

fairs, county
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agricultural fairs
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“Fairs Here Have Become a Sort of Holiday”: Agriculture and Amusements at Iowa’s County Fairs, 1838–1925

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IN 1866 agriculturist **Eber Stone**, delivering the customary annual address at the **Humboldt County Fair**, extolled the virtues of agriculture, labor, and education, but also reminded his listeners that diversions had always been an essential part of fairs. Horse races, games, and other amusements, he contended, were not necessarily harmful, but could be “either noble, instructive and beneficial, or low, cruel and dangerous. . . . Individuals and communities choose between these, which not only indicate, but do much to establish the character, the progress and tendency of the times.” Because the entertainments that a people enjoyed attested to their level of civilization, Stone urged his audience to permit only “decent” and “healthful” diversions on the fairgrounds.¹

Stone’s remarks attest to the utter seriousness with which Iowans pondered the proper relationship between agriculture and amusements at their county and state fairs. The issue was important because fairs were seen as sensitive barometers of “the character, the progress and tendency of the times,” a means for agriculturists to gauge the development of civilization in their locale and their state and to discuss what direction it ought to take in the future.

1. Iowa State Agricultural Society (henceforth ISAS), *Report* (1866), 503.

From their inception, state and county fairs, the primary vehicles through which agricultural societies sought to educate farmers, were a curious mixture of science and entertainment, order and unruliness. As a result, their history, and the considerable controversy that swirled around them, reveals a good deal about the role of agriculture and popular entertainments in the development of the Midwest. While the fairs' agricultural exhibits extolled the labors of the virtuous, independent tiller of the soil, amusements embodied leisure and consumption. A nagging anxiety over the propriety of side-shows and other hangers-on at agricultural fairs thus bespoke the stresses occasioned by the development of capitalist agriculture in the Midwest and the region's integration into the larger national economy and society. The debate over the fairs' two sides, one sober and educational, the other boisterous and entertaining, was thus not merely a squabble over who and what ought to be included in the annual fairs, but a significant, sustained effort to understand and respond to important changes in American life.

Because county fairs were smaller and, ostensibly, more intimately connected with the interests and values of local residents than the much larger state fair, many agriculturists, journalists, and fairgoers insisted that county fairs had a special obligation to remain true to their educational mission. As a result, the debates were often more heated on county fairgrounds than at the state fair. County fair secretaries did not all respond alike, but adopted a wide variety of positions in these debates. Some county fairs were devoted almost entirely to amusements, while others were earnest agricultural exhibitions. The great majority, of course, lay somewhere in between, and all were subject to the competing demands of agricultural progress and entertainment.

MOST OF THE WHITE SETTLERS who came to the Midwest came to farm and to make money at it. Capitalist agriculture was not indigenous to the Midwest, but was transplanted there by settlers and developers. Still, many scientists and economic boosters believed that ordinary "dirt farmers" required instruction in the techniques of scientific agriculture, or "book

farming," if the Midwest were to fulfill its promise as a land of bounty.²

The task of educating farmers was taken up by self-styled scientific agriculturists who banded together to form agricultural societies. They held meetings, published treatises, and, most important, hosted annual fairs to encourage their neighbors to adopt improved farming methods. The men who organized and led these agricultural societies were seldom farmers themselves. Indeed, many agricultural societies were overseen by merchants, professionals, and local boosters. To be an agriculturist, then, was not necessarily to be a farmer. Although these agriculturists cherished the authority conferred by the mantle of science, they were not merely engaged in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. "Scientific agriculture," as promoted by American agricultural societies, was predicated on the belief that farmers ought to conduct their operations like other businessmen, maximizing profits while minimizing costs and labor. Agriculturists conflated science and capitalism, and "book farming" finally rested on the ledger book.³

The Territory of Iowa had provided for the creation of agricultural societies in its earliest laws. Among the first bills passed by the new government upon Iowa's accession as a federal territory in 1838 was "An act to provide for the incorporation of Agricultural Societies." That act empowered a group of twenty or more men in any county to charter "a body corporate and politic" to foster agricultural and economic development in that county. Primarily, these societies were to promote economic progress by disseminating information about scientific agriculture and domestic manufactures and by hosting annual exhibitions, at which they would award prizes to articles of merit. In 1842 and 1843 the Territorial Legislature passed two more acts, specifying agricultural societies' duties

2. Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1963), esp. chaps. 5-7, 10. For another detailed treatment of the development of the Midwest, see John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, CT, 1986).

3. Alan I. Marcus, *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy* (Ames, 1985), 25-26; Mildred Throne, "'Book Farming' in Iowa, 1840-1870," *Iowa Journal of History* 49 (1951), 122-28.

in greater detail, and parceling out public funds for the promotion of agriculture and domestic manufactures to the (as yet nonexistent) county societies.⁴

Government efforts to encourage the creation of agricultural societies met with indifference for nearly a decade. Agriculturists in Van Buren County founded an agricultural society in 1842 and held fairs in the autumn of 1842 and 1843, after which the society disbanded. No other county societies were founded until 1852, when the number of agricultural societies began to increase rapidly. Seven county societies were founded in 1852, and six more the following year. Also in 1853, agriculturists from several counties convened to form the Iowa State Agricultural Society, which hosted the first Iowa State Fair at Fairfield in 1854. By 1855, the state's ninety-nine counties had twenty-five county fairs; by 1860, there were sixty-nine fairs, and, as state agricultural society secretary John Wallace boasted, "Fair Grounds have become about as common as Court Houses."⁵

In 1857 the state legislature passed an important act "for the encouragement of agriculture," which assigned the Iowa State Agricultural Society the responsibility of supervising the burgeoning number of county agricultural societies. These smaller societies were in turn required to submit to the state society an annual report on the condition of agriculture in their county in order to receive their state appropriation of two hundred dollars. Compiling a thorough report on the condition of agriculture in their locale was an enormous burden for many of the small, poorly funded county societies. Joshua Shaffer, a Fairfield phy-

4. *The Statute Laws of the Territory of Iowa*, 1st sess. (1838-39), 241-43; *Revised Statutes of the Territory of Iowa*, 43-46.

5. ISAS, *Report* (1857), 410-13; *ibid.* (1861), 6. For an overview of the proliferation of agricultural societies in early Iowa, see Myrtle Beinhauer, "The County, District, and State Agricultural Societies of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 20 (1935), 50-69. The Articles of Incorporation of many of these county societies may be found in the ISAS Papers, AD VIII, box Z 3, State Archives of Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. The WPA history of Lee County claims that an agricultural society was founded and held a fair there in 1841. Iowa Writers' Program (WPA), "Lee County History," typescript, 1942, 48, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames. Similarly, Louisa County boosters claim that the first Iowa fair was held in their locale. See Arthur Springer, *History of Louisa County*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1912), 1:364.

sician and secretary of the state agricultural society, complained in 1869 that too many county reports were hastily prepared only "to secure the appropriation from the State, [rather] than to give a synopsis of the agricultural condition" of the county. To his annoyance, many county reports described the annual fair in detail, but neglected to discuss the county's crops.⁶

Even with financial assistance from the state, many county societies went bankrupt or were occasionally financially unable to host their annual fair. Rival fairs, poor weather, economic downturns, the Civil War, and dissatisfaction with the fairs' management all drove fairs and agricultural societies into debt or even bankruptcy. The **Des Moines County society** reported in 1858 that it was "sometimes in existence and sometimes not." Its counterpart in **Dubuque County** admitted that it "has had a nominal existence in this county for some time, but has never amounted to anything." In other counties, there was perhaps *too* much interest in creating agricultural societies: some county fairs had to compete not only with fairs in neighboring counties, but with rival fairs within their own county. In addition, in an era when the state fair moved around the state from year to year, county fairs were sometimes overshadowed when the **state fair** was held in their vicinity, and fair secretaries commonly attributed the failure of county fairs to competition from the larger exhibition.⁷

6. 1857 *Laws of Iowa*, 298–300; ISAS, *Report* (1869), 29. See also Joshua M. Shaffer to John McGregor, 14 December 1865, book 11:218, ISAS Papers; Joshua M. Shaffer to J. H. Kelley, 1 December 1866, book 12:391, *ibid.*; John R. Shaffer to A. W. Guernsey, 30 December 1875, book 23:221, *ibid.*; ISAS, *Report* (1877), 525; *ibid.* (1880), 51. In an effort to secure more useful reports, the ISAS circulated a questionnaire to the county societies. For an example of this questionnaire, see ISAS, *Report* (1874), 315–17. For one county agricultural secretary who found the annual report burdensome, see C. C. Fowler to John R. Shaffer, 29 October 1883, box C1, ISAS Papers.

7. ISAS, *Report* (1858), 238–39. See also *ibid.* (1865), 519. Rival societies in Poweshiek County contended with one another from the 1870s until the early 1890s, when the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that two societies in the same county could both receive state funding. ISAS's reports and correspondence contain many references to this controversy. For its resolution, see *Poweshiek County Agricultural Society v. John Shaffer, et al.*, 86 Iowa 377 (1892). On the rivalry between county fairs and the state fair, see ISAS, *Report* (1857), 385; *ibid.* (1859), 325; *ibid.* (1882), 591; *History of Linn County* (Chicago, 1878), 402.

In an effort to create larger, more prosperous exhibitions, some county agricultural societies banded together to form **district agricultural societies**. In addition to the county societies formed in each of the state's ninety-nine counties, more than eighty district societies were created in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some of these district societies went broke in a year or two, while others thrived for decades. Some linked only two or three counties, but larger districts were enormous. The **Cedar Valley District**, under the direction of **Peter Melendy** of Cedar Rapids, perhaps the state's most eminent agriculturist, included eleven counties, while the **Northwestern Iowa District**, which held its first fair in **Fort Dodge** in 1873, comprised thirteen. The **Central Iowa District**, formed in 1860, grew until, by 1870, it encompassed nineteen counties, which were home to one-quarter of the state's population. Still, the number of county fairs continued to grow. In 1880 one district fair manager urged agriculturists to "abandon the baleful policy of scattering our forces." Because "there are too many fairs and too few creditable exhibitions," he pointed out, few counties could succeed over the long term. "If two-thirds of the county societies would disband and re-organize on the district plan, embracing a larger population in such concentrated effort," he concluded, "the fairs would be more popular and useful."⁸

The fairs hosted by these larger district societies attracted thousands of patrons, and secretaries of district societies (and even of some county societies) often boasted that their fair's agricultural exhibits rivaled, or even surpassed, the **state fair's**. Indeed, district fairs posed a considerable challenge to the fledgling state agricultural society, which resolved that district societies were "not desirable," ostensibly not because they were rivals to the state society, but because they undercut farmers' allegiance to their county societies. By the 1880s, district fairs no longer posed a serious challenge to the state fair's preeminence or its receipts. Indeed, district societies now seemed advantageous. "The day is not far distant," wrote secretary **John Shaffer**,

8. ISAS, *Report* (1880), 338. See also *ibid.* (1881), 408. On the advantages of district societies, see *ibid.* (1884), 688-89; *ibid.* (1865), 383, 404; *ibid.* (1873), 436-37; *ibid.* (1870), 425; J. M. Dixon, *Centennial History of Polk County, Iowa* (Des Moines, 1876), 178.

who succeeded his uncle Joshua as secretary of the state agricultural society, in 1884, "when the number of our *county fairs* will have to be reduced and organized into districts. Too many now live on the state's appropriations, and even with this too many are failures." Many of the societies that were not outright failures were barely solvent. Still, agriculturists proudly tallied the growing number of both county and district agricultural societies, along with increasing crop yields, as evidence of the state's rapid progress. In 1880 ninety-nine county and district societies filed annual reports; by 1893, at least 115 societies served the state's ninety-nine counties. John Wallace's boast in 1860 had been surpassed; fairgrounds had, in fact, become even more common than courthouses, and fairs were a staple of Iowa's culture.⁹

COUNTY FAIRS were predicated on a few simple tenets. Farming was humankind's most important, noblest calling, and the fair was both an important means for improving the practice of agriculture and a barometer for measuring the status of local farmers. By educating farmers, fairs would increase agricultural productivity and enhance the reputation of farming. One fair secretary grandly characterized the county fair as "a camp ground annually tented in the defense and promotion of the great cause of agriculture, mechanism, and every art that tends to advance the interests of the farmer, and elevate and secure to him the true and noble position that nature has assigned him." According to Joshua Shaffer, who was secretary of the Jefferson County society as well as the state society, a county fair "should be the representative of the agricultural condition, resources, capacity of improvement etc., of the county."¹⁰

9. On the rivalry between district fairs and the state fair, see ISAS, *Report* (1858), 234; *ibid.* (1862), 223; *ibid.* (1863), 347, 362, 363–64; *ibid.* (1865), 532; *ibid.* (1866), 333; *ibid.* (1870), 30; Joshua M. Shaffer to John Q. Tufts, 21 February 1871, book 17:184, ISAS Papers; JMS to John Grinnell 24 March 1871, book 17:266, *ibid.* On the state society's support for district societies, see John R. Shaffer to Festus J. Wade, 8 December 1884, book 34:182–83, *ibid.* See also ISAS, *Report* (1878), 47; Earle D. Ross, *Iowa Agriculture: An Historical Survey* (Iowa City, 1951), 86; Beinbauer, "Agricultural Societies," 55.

10. ISAS, *Report* (1865), 228–40 (quotation from 230); *ibid.* (1863), 418. Similarly, J. C. Johnson of the Chickasaw County Agricultural Society characterized the

To the annoyance of many agriculturists, farmers were sometimes reluctant to participate in their local societies and fairs and slow to adopt scientific agriculture. The secretary of the Jones County Agricultural Society, Dr. J. S. Dimmitt, complained that attendance at the first Jones County Fair was small, citizens' interest in the exhibits smaller, "and the prospects for building up an Agricultural Society, the *smallest* kind." Farmers were not merely apathetic, according to their critics, but were positively resistant to scientific advances. Isaac Kneeland, another physician, who ran the Lucas County Agricultural Society, complained that "our farmers are poor agriculturists, with few exceptions. They are not reading men, and are generally disposed to plow as shallow as they can." Similarly, E. T. Cole, secretary of the Davis County Agricultural Society, declared in 1866 that too many farmers "are contented to plod along in the same dull routine of work that their fathers and neighbors did." Downright resistant to innovation, farmers were scarcely the sort of people to be entrusted to build the state's economy; indeed, characterizing farmers as "shallow" and "plodding" suggests that, despite agriculturists' paeans to the virtues of farm life, they viewed farmers as impediments to progress.¹¹

As an index to the condition of agriculture in their locale, many early fairs supplied evidence that the enterprise of transplanting "civilization" and scientific farming to the frontier had barely taken root. As one resident later recalled, the first Montgomery County Fair, held in 1859, resembled not an outpost of civilization, but a band of "shipwrecked and homeless people on a barren island, for the scene was bounded only by the distant horizon." Many farmers were reluctant to join their county

fair as the "standard of the thrift and intelligence of the farmers of a county." Ibid. (1876), 355. See also *ibid.* (1858), 234. See also Catherine E. Kelley, "'The Consummation of Rural Prosperity and Happiness': New England Agricultural Fairs and the Construction of Class and Gender, 1810-1860," *American Studies* 49 (1997), 574-602.

11. ISAS, *Report* (1858), 282; *ibid.* (1859), 318; *ibid.* (1866), 340, 342-43. For other complaints about farmers' apathy toward the county fair, see *ibid.* (1857), 224; *ibid.* (1858), 196; *ibid.* (1863), 402; *ibid.* (1866), 314-15; *ibid.* (1869), 225, 274; *ibid.* (1874), 319; *ibid.* (1875), 372. For other complaints about farmers' reluctance to adopt scientific agriculture, see *ibid.* (1857), 237, 243-44; *ibid.* (1864), 304, 358.

agricultural society or to tote exhibits along to the fair only to be subjected to what one agriculturist termed "the scathing ordeal of public opinion." As a result, exhibits at the first **Marion County Fair** in 1853 consisted of a few cattle, a dozen horses, a few field crops, and a pair of quilts. Fairgoers perusing the display of housewares at the first **Montgomery County Fair** saw only "a cheese—the first in the county . . . some butter and a few tin cans containing sorghum syrup." Even the most studious fairgoer could scarcely be expected to glean much knowledge from exhibits this meager.¹²

County fairs were predicated on the assumption that farmers could be educated most effectively about **scientific agriculture** by observing animals, objects, and exhibits, and then emulating outstanding examples. Of course, precisely because fairgoers were disposed to make up their own minds about the various exhibits, the agricultural and educational competitions of county fairs were frequently a source of controversy. Almost inevitably, disputes arose over judges' credentials, judging standards, the classification of items in the premium list, and the amount of premiums. Yielding to the views of university-trained scientists at Iowa State College, the **state fair** began to employ trained livestock judges in the 1880s, and the fair's managers quickly discovered that exhibitors seldom challenged the authority of "expert" judges. County fairs, however, continued to rely on the "pick-up system," in which local farmers were enlisted to judge animals and **exhibits**. Relying on amateur judges had considerable drawbacks, but, as one agriculturist noted, farmers and fairgoers ought to arrive at their own conclusions regarding the merits of the animal, crop, or object. The goal of a fair's **livestock exhibits**, he wrote, is "not to find out which is the best horse, cow, or other exhibit, but to educate ourselves so we may be able to appreciate the good qualities and detect the bad ones." Viewing a livestock exhibit would force farmers to consider what distinguished a blue-ribbon cow from the herd, and, because the judges themselves were amateurs, "the onlookers feel free to discuss the merits of the awards, which on the whole

12. W. W. Merritt, *A History of the County of Montgomery* (Red Oak, 1906), 220–22. See also ISAS, *Report* (1857), 249, 283–84, 352; *ibid.* (1858) 324–25; *ibid.* (1863), 418–20; *ibid.* (1864), 358; *ibid.* (1896), 414–15.

is the best school." To a greater extent than the state fair, then, county fairs continued to operate according to the belief that ordinary farmers were competent to evaluate the exhibits, and continued to reward animals and exhibits that embodied the standards and aesthetic tastes of the community.¹³

FAIRS were officially consecrated to disseminating knowledge and developing the agricultural economy, but they were also an occasion for festivity. Fairs often included horse races, band concerts, and other diversions, and were invariably attended by myriad itinerant show people offering a variety of shows and games. Some fairs invited these entertainers to operate on the fairgrounds, while others kept them outside the grounds (hence the term *sideshow*.) Whether they were officially part of the fair's bill or unwelcome hangers-on, show people were inescapably part of the fair in some larger sense, and agriculturists pondered their relationship to the enterprise of agricultural education.

The most popular diversion at county fairs was horse racing. More than any other aspect of the fair, horse racing forced agriculturists to confront the sometimes blurred boundary between agricultural education and entertainment. Racing, like all entertainments, posed a dilemma for agriculturists. Some argued that horse racing served the same function as exhibits, displaying and rewarding fine examples of this breed of stock. Others insisted that racing should be prohibited at agricultural exhibitions because it detracted from their primary educational purpose. Still others, who questioned racing's educational value, were willing to permit it because it attracted crowds, thus enabling fairs to make enough money to pay premiums to their exhibitors.¹⁴

Opponents of horse racing raised several objections to the prominence of trotting and racing on fairgrounds: races attracted gamblers, they were fixed, and they distracted the fair's patrons and detracted from its purpose. Opponents fretted that racing

13. ISAS, *Report* (1890), 288. See also *ibid.* (1857), 307, 311; *ibid.* (1859), 230; *ibid.* (1869), 226-27; *ibid.* (1873), 370; *ibid.* (1888), 483; Leslie Prosterman, *Ordinary Life, Festival Days* (Washington, DC, 1995).

14. ISAS, *Report* (1892), 283.

would corrupt county fairs, opening their gates to a torrent of games, freak shows, and other objectionable diversions. In 1864 the state legislature lumped horse racing together with liquor selling and gambling, banning all three inside the enclosure or within a half-mile of county fairs, but this law seems to have done little to halt the spread of racing at fairs. In 1872 the *Iowa Homestead*, one of the state's foremost agricultural periodicals, complained that too many agricultural fairs had been "prostituted" into "Agricultural Hoss Trots," at which "the combined products of the Farm, Orchard, Garden and Household, are unimportant side shows," while races, along with "bearded women, five-legged calves, giants, dwarves, learned pigs, hand organs, dice and whiskey stands," were the main attraction.¹⁵

Foes of trotting and racing insisted that farmers especially disliked racing, because races diverted the fair's emphasis and its revenues away from agriculture and toward fast horses. Racing's critics insisted that races diminished not only a fair's reputation, but even its receipts, claiming that farmers would not support fairs whose exhibits were overshadowed by horse racing. The 1874 *Winneshiek County Fair* lost money, according to secretary H. H. Eaton, not because of the financial depression gripping the nation, but "owing to the disposition of the farmers not to patronize the fair while there is horse-racing allowed on the grounds." Several agricultural societies reported that reducing the premiums paid for racing at their fairs pleased local farmers and enhanced the exhibits of livestock and crops.¹⁶

Supporters of horse races countered that horses were vital to the state's agricultural economy, and that speed was a desirable characteristic in horses, and one that agricultural societies were thus obliged to foster. Because the value of premiums offered for horse racing commonly exceeded those for other exhibits, horse races did divert a fair's resources away from agricultural education, but proponents of racing contended that races attracted

15. 1864 *Laws of Iowa*, 140; *Iowa Homestead and Western Farm Journal* 17 (13 September 1872), 292.

16. ISAS, *Report* (1874), 481. See also *ibid.* (1859), 349; *ibid.* (1871), 386; *ibid.* (1873), 445; *ibid.* (1878), 861; *ibid.* (1887), 538-39. For examples of county fairs that found it advantageous to diminish the importance of racing, see *ibid.* (1871), 437; *ibid.* (1879), 359.

patrons to the fair, where they would almost invariably spend at least a few minutes perusing the agricultural exhibits. One agriculturist claimed that the 1869 **Scott County Fair** had been pleasing to its patrons, educational, and financially successful precisely because it offered a good racing program. Had the fair's managers yielded to opponents of horse racing, "they would still have been holding their annual meetings on two or three acres of ground, and measured the attendance by fewer hundreds than they now do by thousands." As a result, he argued, "Agriculture in all its branches would have been years behind where it now is."¹⁷

Furthermore, as supporters of racing pointed out, plenty of the spectators pressed against the outside rail of the racetrack were farmers. Increasingly, many agriculturists were forced to concede, sometimes grudgingly, that racing was not merely a citified entertainment. "People, even farmers, are giving more attention to fast trotting," observed one county fair secretary in 1878, as though he was surprised to discover farmers rubbing elbows with townfolk around the track. When the **Chickasaw County Agricultural Society** eliminated races from its fair in 1886, the society's officers were "met with bitter opposition, and . . . were denounced in most flagrant terms." "Strange as it may appear," the society's secretary wrote, "the most serious part of this opposition and denunciation came from the farmers—the very class in whose favor the change was made, and who receive the greatest benefit therefrom." Although agriculturists and other foes of racing frequently invoked their concern for farmers when attempting to limit or eliminate racing and other entertainments at the fair, farmers were often to be found at the racetrack and sideshows, as well as at the agricultural exhibits.¹⁸

Increasingly, agriculturists conceded that the popularity of trotting and racing was not confined to cities and towns, and began to make fewer apologies for the prominence of the track on their grounds. The secretary of one county agricultural society spoke for many fair secretaries when he declared, "It has been demonstrated time and again that the success of the fair is

17. *Ibid.* (1868), 181.

18. *Ibid.* (1878), 612; *ibid.* (1886), 299.



*Spectators line the rail to watch the races at a fair in Waverly in 1911.
Photo courtesy State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.*

in offering more inducements to horses of merit and speed." Well-intentioned but misguided efforts to decrease or even eliminate racing almost invariably resulted in financial disaster. In 1874 the Franklin County Agricultural Society reduced the amount of premiums paid to horse owners in order to increase the awards offered in its livestock exhibits. The results, according to its secretary, were not gratifying. "Experience has taught us," he wrote the following year, "that there must be a certain amount of horse in every fair to ensure success." To the charge that races deflected attention from the fair's legitimate purpose, one agriculturist responded dryly, "A good horse race will stir up more agricultural feeling in a farmer than all the fine cattle, draft horses and hogs combined. It would be next to impossible to hold a fair if it was not for the races." The secretary of the Iowa County Fair echoed that sentiment in 1886, declaring, "County fairs cannot be made a success if run strictly upon agricultural principles. People soon tire of looking at a few cattle,

horses, sheep and farm products; they must be entertained; plenty of attractions should be secured to suit the tastes and demands of all, and fast horses are usually the main and most successful of all attractions."¹⁹

After years of debate, the propriety of agricultural societies offering premiums for "trials of speed" actually came to trial itself in 1881. In that year the Iowa Supreme Court settled the matter, at least legally, when it ruled that the state's outright prohibition of horse racing at county fairs (which had been largely ignored) was outweighed by the legal stipulation that agricultural societies offer premiums for the improvement of stock. According to the court, although horse races as such were illegal, the law did not prohibit agricultural societies "from allowing trials of speed or horse-racing as a means of improving the stock of horses." It was perhaps as clear a verdict as could be expected, given horse racing's place astride the boundary between the fairs' agricultural exhibits and their entertainments.²⁰

Sideshow
14-17

HORSE RACES were by no means the county fairs' only entertainments. County fairs also attracted plenty of show people, who clustered near or within the fairgrounds. Some members of county agricultural societies argued that amusements ought to have no place on their fairgrounds, or even in their vicinity, since they were not a legitimate part of the agricultural fair, and only townfolk, not farmers, were attracted by them. Even those agriculturists who were willing to permit entertainments at their fairs often drew a sharp boundary between education and entertainment, as though patrons attended the fair exclusively for one or the other. "We have two classes of people," observed one county fair secretary in 1871. "One class will attend a fair for general information, whilst the other class will only visit places of amusements, and unless the fair furnishes amusements they cannot be brought out." Indeed, some advocates of strictly agri-

19. ISAS, *Report* (1879), 486-87; *ibid.* (1874), 361-62; *ibid.* (1875), 322, 369; *ibid.*, (1887), 479; *ibid.* (1886), 383. See also *ibid.* (1877), 384; *ibid.* (1878), 612; *ibid.* (1879), 476; *ibid.* (1883), 403; *ibid.* (1887), 398, 479; *ibid.* (1890), 300-301; *ibid.* (1892), 465; John R. Shaffer to S. D. Bevington, 8 March 1888, book 38:420-22, ISAS Papers.

20. *Delier v. The Plymouth County Agricultural Society*, 57 Iowa 481 (1881).

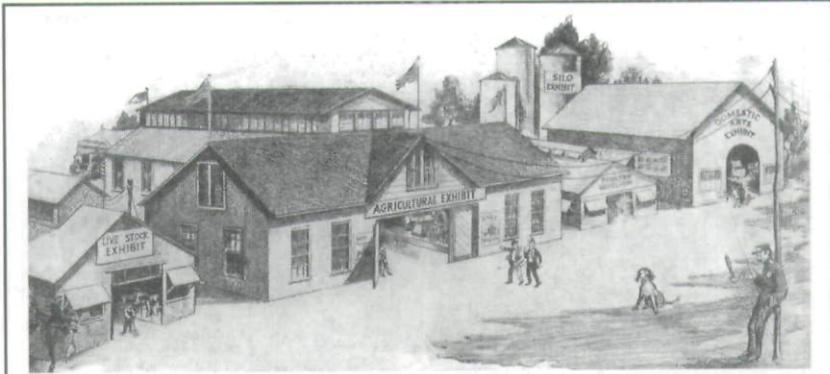


A snake eater attracts fairgoers in Eldora around the turn of the century. Photo courtesy State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

cultural fairs were troubled by the fairs' juxtaposition of education and entertainment. "The county fair," complained the *Iowa Homestead* in 1889, "is at present a sort of hermaphrodite, neither wholly a school of instruction nor a place of amusement, often harboring a den of thieves and gamblers, yet it has within it the possibility of great usefulness to the farmer." The fair's juxtaposition of education and entertainment, according to the journal, rendered it a sort of freak.²¹

Because county agricultural societies received funds from the state government to improve the condition of agriculture in their locale, the state's agricultural press and fairgoers often complained about those county fairs that served little educational purpose and so were unworthy of state support. One farmer declared that the 1889 **Howard County Fair** "came just

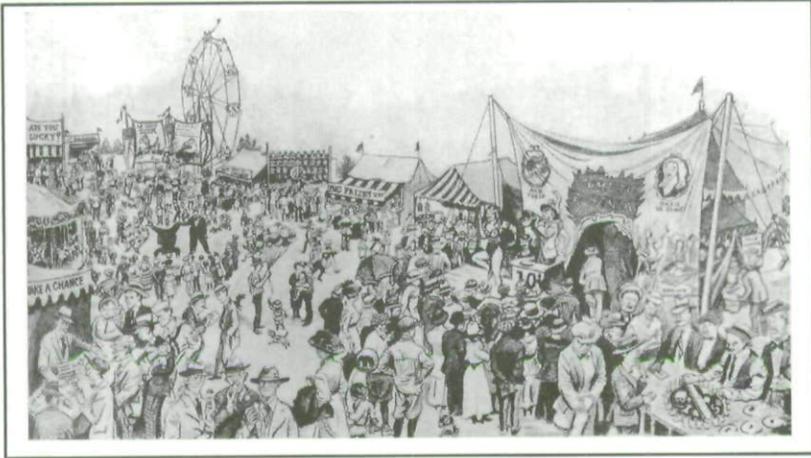
21. ISAS, *Report* (1871), 455; *Iowa Homestead* 34 (23 August 1889), 1. See also ISAS, *Report* (1867), 489; *ibid.* (1876), 355; *ibid.* (1875), 421; *ibid.* (1890), 428.



An artist contrasted the popularity of exhibits and amusements at fairs for an article in the *Country Gentleman* 87 (8 April 1922). The drawings appeared on facing pages, as they do here. The caption for this one read, "In Many a Fair the Exhibit Buildings, Built by the State at a Cost of Thousands of Dollars, are Practically Empty." The caption on the facing page read, "But All Day the Wide and Long Avenue of the Midway, Lined on Each Side with 'Grind Stores,' is Thronged With Visitors."

about as near being an agricultural exhibition as a low unscrupulous circus." The unprincipled managers of the **Tipton Fair Association**, according to one irate fairgoer, booked "all the most degrading amusements they can think of," including "the disgusting shows of Hoochee Coochee, which is a disgrace to a civilized country." In 1887 **Sam Kenyon**, secretary of the **Chickasaw County Agricultural Society**, grumbled that, rather than fostering progress, fairs were hastening the decline of the Midwest.

Modern fairs have degenerated from their primitive form. Their managers have pandered to greed, passion and prejudice, until, what with balloon ascensions, base ball, Buffalo Bill, jugglers, side shows, horse racing and gambling generally they have become more of a circus than an agricultural exhibition. And all because the "people" required amusement. No greater fallacy ever existed. Do we send our children to school to be amused? The fair is a business school; originated and designated to encourage and promote a proper system of agriculture, and to amuse only as the reception of intelligence brings gladness to the mind.



In 1899 **Reuben Sanders** of Montezuma wrote to the *Iowa Homestead* to complain that the main attractions at the **Poweshiek County Fair** were a drunken high diver, who accidentally plummeted to his death while performing his act, and “an Indian side show where both men and women danced entirely naked.” Clearly, amusements such as these undermined fairs’ claims to be educational and civic institutions.²²

If entertainments truly held no allure for farmers, of course, there would be little danger that they would distract farmers’ attention away from the fairs’ agricultural exhibits. Critics of entertainments were often confounded by farmers, who seemed not to share their enthusiasm for **exhibitions** devoted exclusively to scientific agriculture. In 1897 one exasperated county fair secretary complained that “the citizens of Washington County do not deserve a fair of the proportions of our last; they do not appreciate it; in fact, they would rather pay 25 cents to see ‘diving horses,’ or the lady in tights go up in a balloon than the best fair

22. C. E. Brown to John R. Shaffer, 26 September 1889, box C1, ISAS papers; Cecelia Haak to John C. Simpson, 17 November 1902, *ibid.*; ISAS, *Report* (1887), 318–19; *Iowa Homestead* 44 (3 August 1899), Farmers Institute edition, 179. The ethnological exhibits that the *Homestead* correspondent complained about deserve condemnation not only for their “lewdness,” which did encourage voyeurism on the part of fairgoers, but also for their racism. See Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair* (Chicago, 1986); ISAS, *Report* (1897), 450; see also *Iowa Homestead* 46 (1901), Farmers Institute edition, 99–102.

possible to get up. . . . The reputation of the county and town makes one blush to think of the absolute apathy and selfishness of some of our people."²³

Entertainments had their supporters as well as their detractors. Fairgoers, of course, were not subject to compulsory attendance laws, and so had to be coaxed into the classroom if the fair were to educate them. As a result, a growing number of agriculturists began to characterize entertainments not as an expedient means to lure patrons to the fairs' exhibits, but as a much needed respite for the state's hard-working farm families. If fairgoers inadvertently picked up a few tips about farming or homemaking while strolling around the fairgrounds, so much the better. But even if they steered clear of the educational exhibits, a brief vacation from the rigors and isolation of farm life was ample justification for holding and attending the annual fair. As the secretary of the **Montgomery County Fair** observed in 1869, "the information which is to be obtained at such occasions, is not sufficient to induce all farmers to visit a county fair; yet, when a circus or some other show is in town they are at hand. . . . but if the farming community wishes amusements, let a fair be a source of pleasure as well as instruction. Thus the pleasure-seeker is brought in contact with the instructive part of a fair, and proves beneficial to all." In 1878 one district fair secretary went further, declaring that "the ordinary fair must be superseded by something offering more striking attractions than the exhibition of stock, however excellent; of machinery, however indispensable; of artistic and mechanical displays, however tasteful and ingenious." The fair's **exhibits** of crops, livestock, machinery, and housewares, he observed, had become so commonplace that people simply would not pay to see them. Indeed, fairs' agricultural exhibits were sometimes regarded as little more than a display of freakishly large produce, often derisively referred to as the "pumpkin store."²⁴

Those fair secretaries who favored entertainments at the fair insisted that farmers, who spent fifty-one weeks each year en-

23. ISAS, *Report* (1897), 450.

24. *Ibid.* (1869), 278-79; *ibid.* (1878), 753; *ibid.* (1890), 298; *Iowa Homestead* 44 (3 August 1899), Farmers Institute edition, 179.

gaged in production, scarcely needed an annual fair devoted solely to agriculture; instead, they needed a holiday, even a carnival, during which they could leave work behind, if only briefly. In 1875 the secretary of one county agricultural society conceded that "fairs here have become a sort of holiday, people attend them for amusement, not to exhibit their success in stock growing or skill on the farm, workshop or in household labor." Another county fair manager observed, without regret, "The fair seems to be regarded by farmers more as a play spell than as a means of comparison and improvement." As one district fair manager wrote, "The American people as a rule, and especially in the farming classes, have too few holidays, and their minds are too much on their individual pursuits and callings." When the state's farm families marked the fairs' dates on their calendars, they looked forward to an opportunity to trade their daily routine for the sights, sounds, and crowds of the fairground. Initially consecrated to extolling agricultural productivity, the fair was becoming an annual ritual devoted to festivity and consumption. A Polk County resident put the matter succinctly: "Farmers need more holidays—not less."²⁵

As they became more willing to countenance entertainments, agriculturists began to refer to themselves as "fair men," and many agricultural societies were renamed "fair associations." Beginning in the 1880s, these new fair associations acknowledged that their primary task was not to compile statistics on sorghum yields or disseminate information about raising Duroc hogs, but to book acrobats and balloonists. As members of the burgeoning outdoor entertainment industry, county fair secretaries banded together to create fair circuits to book acts and curtail competition between neighboring fairs. In 1888 they founded the Iowa Fair Secretaries Association in order to share information about the fair business, especially about the tricky matter of booking successful attractions.²⁶

25. For these early proponents of entertainments at county fairs, see ISAS, *Report* (1875), 322; *ibid.* (1884), 342; *ibid.* (1886), 482; *Iowa Homestead* 44 (3 August 1899), Farmers Institute edition, 181.

26. *Iowa State Register*, 7 September 1888; ISAS, *Report* (1888), 403. In 1891 the ISAS set aside a tent on the state fairgrounds for officers of county and district societies to conduct meetings. See ISAS, *Report* (1890), 635.

Some agriculturists and fair men—and midwesterners generally—were becoming more likely to accept entertainments as an inherent part of the fair. As John Scott, secretary of the Cass County Fair, observed in 1892, fairs could not attract and hold crowds unless they offered “some kind of amusement that will entertain the crowd from morning until night.” That same year, the state agricultural society’s annual report conceded that county fairs were invariably accompanied by “the small gambler, the vendor of cheap jewelry, . . . the modest fellows who throw balls, pitch rings, shoot at a target, test the strength, etc. . . . camp followers who have side-shows with curios and monstrosities, and concerts and dances,” and sundry other diversions. The society acknowledged that these fakirs and hangers-on were somehow integral to the spirit of fairs, which would seem almost lifeless without them. According to the society’s annual report, sideshows were “a part of the entertainment for which the crowds have also come. . . . What would the fair be without the clamor and noise and shouting?”²⁷

If a growing number of agriculturists, fair men, and Iowans generally had come to accept a role for entertainments at county fairs, a few perceptive observers recognized that the effort to draw a stark boundary between the fairs’ educational exhibits and their entertainments had always been misguided. Nelson Lloyd, writing in 1903 in *Scribner’s*, recited the “agricultural gospel” that exhibits of livestock and machinery were the county fairs’ very reason for being, and that entertainments were permitted on the fairgrounds only to foster the fairs’ educational mission. But Lloyd proceeded to mock agricultural pieties. While exhibits of items from “workaday life” might make the fair educational, they were “not likely to prove of very great drawing power.” Entertainments did much more than merely attract patrons; they animated the fairs’ very soul, breathing “light and life” into the exhibition. The garish sights, discordant sounds, and piquant tastes of the midway left “every sense sated,” so that, while strolling the fairgrounds, “there may by chance be driven into our dull minds some truths as to the value of lime or clay ground or of oyster-shells in hens.” As

27. *Ibid.* (1892), 290, 115.

Lloyd well understood, the "spirit" of the fair engaged the senses, not the intellect.²⁸

BY THE OUTSET of the twentieth century, amusements were an integral part of Iowa's county fairs. The long-running debate over agriculture versus entertainment did not end after the turn of the century, but its character changed subtly as it became increasingly entangled with a much broader discussion of the condition of rural life and the economic problems confronting farmers. Fairs were viewed both as an index of the health of rural life and as a means for improving the lives of rural Americans, and Americans were confronting ample evidence that both rural life and county fairs were losing their appeal. Census figures confirmed that many farm families were moving to town, and the number of county and district fairs held annually in Iowa dwindled steadily in the early years of the twentieth century, from 120 in the 1890s to fewer than 80 by the 1920s. One observer in 1904 looked upon the county fair as "having served its purpose and time, and having gone the way of all things sublunar, so far as this state is concerned."²⁹

Not everyone agreed that fairs were doomed. When the federal government began to direct its attention to improving the conditions of "country life" in the early twentieth century, agriculturists and reformers spied an opportunity to revive county fairs by renewing their role as educational institutions. They contended that the plight of rural Americans obliged fair managers to redouble their commitment to making the fair an educator, not in the antiquated manner of encouraging farm folk to peruse exhibits, but by allowing university-trained agricultural scientists and home economists to shape many of the fairs' exhibits. Fairs would no longer merely allow patrons to view prize-winning exhibits, or regale them with eloquent but ineffective orations about the virtues of tilling the soil; instead, fairs would be utilized in a vast educational effort designed to improve the living conditions of rural Americans. In 1906 the *Des Moines Register* announced that "there is a great revival of

28. Nelson Lloyd, "The County Fair," *Scribner's* 34 (August 1903), 132.

29. *Iowa Homestead* 49 (1904), 1076-77.

interest in the organization of county fairs," owing to the recognition that these fairs could be utilized in new ways to educate farmers and improve the quality of rural life. The following year, *Wallaces' Farmer* hailed the replacement of horse races and carnivals with "Good County Fairs" that would "bring out the resources of the county and stimulate agricultural study." By disseminating up-to-date information about scientific agriculture, fairs would help make farm life more appealing. The *Iowa Homestead*, long an opponent of entertainments at fairs, still insisted that "town folks have their theaters, motion picture shows, and amusement parks," while "the country fair is primarily designed for the benefit of the farmer." Utilizing county fairs to improve rural life garnered support outside the Midwest. In 1913 *The Nation*, published in New York City, endorsed efforts to improve rural life and to clean up county fairs and suggested that the plain word "fair" might be replaced by the more scientific term "experiment in cooperative recreation."³⁰

The Country Life Commission's efforts to make rural life more appealing for young people also had ramifications for county fairs. Appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 to study rural life and suggest possibilities for its improvement, the commission recommended the creation of a federally funded rural extension service, which would enable university-trained extension agents to disseminate knowledge about scientific agriculture and home economics to farm families, and especially to young people. The commission's recommendation culminated in the establishment of 4-H under the provisions of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. Local 4-H clubs brought farm girls together to study home economics while farm boys concentrated on agriculture, all under the direction of university extension agents. Although American entry into World War I postponed government efforts to improve rural life, 4-H clubs began to play a large role in the lives of many rural youth in the 1920s. Exhibits detailing the accomplishments of 4-H members transformed the agricultural displays and competitions at state and

30. *Des Moines Register*, 30 August 1906; *Wallaces' Farmer* 32 (23 August 1907), 916; *Iowa Homestead* 57 (29 August 1912), 1556-57; *The Nation* 97 (August 1913), 160-61. See also *Des Moines Register*, 22 August 1904; *Wallaces' Farmer* 31 (24 August 1906), 990; *Iowa Homestead* 66 (29 December 1921), 2161.

county fairs throughout the United States and enhanced fairs' educational reputation.³¹

Although the effort to make county fairs more educational and to use them to encourage young people to remain on the farm substantially altered the fairs' educational exhibits, it did not eliminate entertainments from the fair, much less redress all of the myriad problems afflicting rural life. With entertainments a fixture at fairs, criticism increasingly focused on the need to "clean up" the sideshows and midways. A new outpouring of criticism of carnivals in the 1920s reminded fair men that some midwesterners still were not reconciled to the presence of amusements at fairs. In 1921 one fair man declared that "some of the attractions being put over at these fairs in Iowa ought to be canned." Too many shows and games, he complained, were "junk," or "rotten," and fair men ought to band together and contract only with reputable booking agents, until undesirable shows were "weeded out."³²

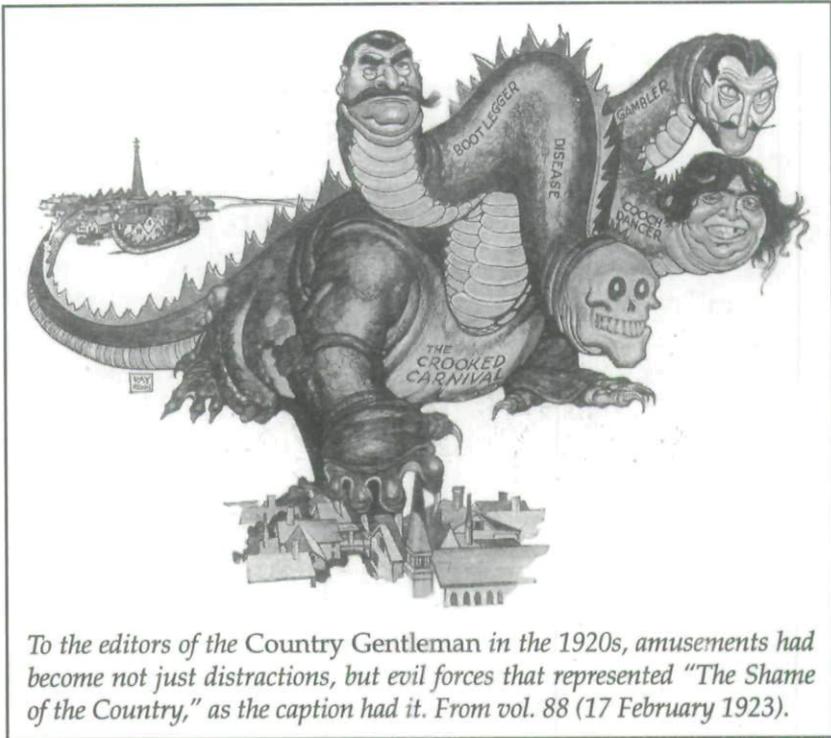
The following year, the assault on crooked carnivals became a nationwide crusade after the *Country Gentleman*, an eastern agricultural periodical, published the anonymous "Confessions of a Fair Faker," an exposé of corruption in the carnival business. The series precipitated widespread calls for cleaning up or strictly regulating outdoor shows.³³ In the wake of this criticism, the Showmen's League of America, an association of carnival operators, convened for its annual meeting in Chicago. Thomas J. Johnson, the league's legal counsel, warned members that they faced a choice between self-regulation and extinction. The

Sideshows

31. On the origins of 4-H, see Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York, 1935), 135-45. See also *Report of the Country Life Commission* (1911; reprint, New York, 1917); and David Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames, 1979), 42-46.

32. *Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture* 22 (1921), 205. On fair men's efforts to band together, see *ibid.* 14 (1913), 243, 254-55; *ibid.* 17 (1916), 137-39; *ibid.* 20 (1919), 178; *ibid.* 23 (1922), 65-66; A. L. Denio to John Simpson, March 1908, box Sz 11, ISAS Papers.

33. *Country Gentleman* 87 (8 April 1922), 4-5; *ibid.* (15 April 1922), 7; *ibid.* (22 April 1922), 9. Although *Country Gentleman* was published in Philadelphia, it circulated nationally and addressed topics of interest to farmers in all regions. Wayne Caldwell Neely discusses the wave of opposition to carnivals in the 1920s in *The Agricultural Fair*, 206-7. See also *Country Gentleman* 87 (6 May 1922), 7, 22.



delegates responded by appointing **Johnson** as commissioner of the **Showmen's Legislative Committee**, granting him authority to expel crooked or immoral showmen from the league, and to notify fair men, mayors, sheriffs, and newspapers about those **carnivals** that failed to receive the organization's approval.³⁴

34. Johnson also received a budget of \$85,000 (to be increased to \$100,000 the following year) and a staff of twelve assistants to travel the nation inspecting carnivals. A. B. Macdonald, "It's Now or Never for the Carnivals," *Country Gentleman* 88 (2 June 1923), 3-4; see, in the same issue, the editorial, "The Carnival's Reprieve," 14; Thomas J. Johnson, "Crooked Carnivals," *ibid.* 90 (25 April 1925), 7; A. B. Macdonald, "Carnivals Must Clean Up Or Be Cleaned," *ibid.* 88 (1 December 1923), 8. The Showmen's League was founded in 1913; its first president was Buffalo Bill. The outdoor entertainment business proved difficult to regulate, and Johnson was soon frustrated in his effort to clean up the carnival industry. By 1926, the Showmen's Legislative Committee was widely regarded as a failure by show people, and Johnson resigned as its commissioner. See A. B. Macdonald, "The Nickel Nicker, the Gimmick and the Yap," *Country Gentleman* 91 (May 1926), 9, 92.

To fair men and show people, "cleaning up" the fairs certainly did not entail sweeping away entertainments altogether. Instead, show people worked to clean up the carnival business in order to enable entertainments to gain easier access to the fairgrounds. One of the time-honored methods for deflecting criticism of immoral shows was to blame small, independent operators for carnivals' poor reputation and to discourage fair managers from booking those entertainers. The Showmen's Legislative Committee complained that "hop-scotch grifters" (individual show people who were not affiliated with a large carnival company) were responsible for carnivals' tarnished image.³⁵ Show people strove to clean up the entertainment business by driving these small or disreputable carnival companies and sideshows out of business so that fairs would not be vulnerable to charges of booking entertainments that offended or corrupted fairgoers. County fairs had become an indispensable venue for the outdoor entertainment business, and entertainments an indispensable aspect of the fair. Entertainments might be cleaned up, but they could not be swept away altogether.

THE ANNUAL COUNTY FAIR was an occasion for agriculturists, fair men, farmers, and journalists to take stock of the condition of their locale. Because Iowa was overwhelmingly rural and agricultural, some fairgoers interpreted the presence of sideshows on or near the fairground as evidence that agriculture was not being accorded respect commensurate with its importance, or that the virtue of hard work was being corrupted by showmen, those transient agents of consumption and leisure. Yet amusements gradually gained more tolerance and acceptance on the fairgrounds. Fairs had always been accompanied by amusements, but as early as the 1870s a growing number of Iowa's county fairs depended on races and shows for their success, and, beginning in the 1880s, fair men replaced agriculturalists at the helm of many fairs. Still, the debate—sometimes good-natured, sometimes heated—over the role of amusements at county fairs endured for decades, because America's seismic

35. A. B. Macdonald, "Hop-Scotch Grifters," *Country Gentleman* 89 (10 May 1924), 15, 31.

shift from a rural nation predicated on agricultural production to an increasingly urbanized society devoted to industrialization, consumer culture, and leisure was not sudden or tidy, but protracted and contentious. Long after it seemed well established that entertainments were an indispensable, legitimate, even welcome aspect of the annual fair, Iowans continued to use the fair—as they had used it for decades—to gauge the progress and prospects of their culture, their communities, and their state.

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