

# Looking Forward and Backward



## *The Iowa State Fair at the Close of the 19th Century*

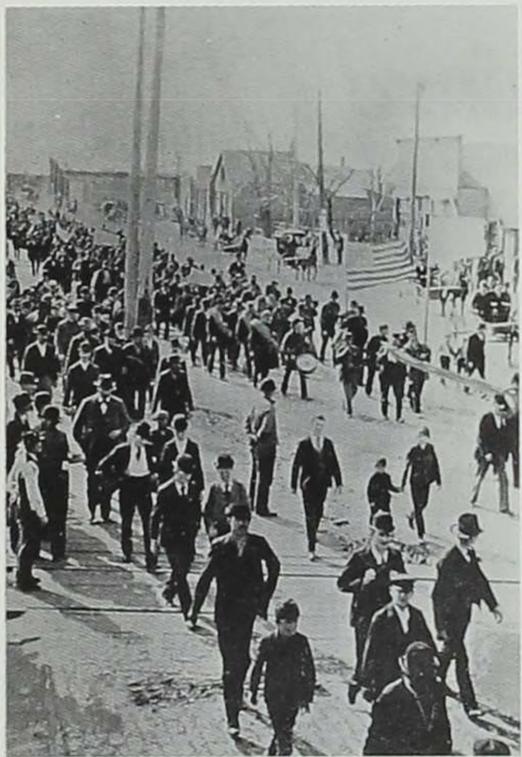
by Chris Rasmussen



In 1899, the state of Iowa was scarcely more than half a century old. The state's most eagerly watched institution, the Iowa State Fair, was even younger, having originated in 1854. Nonetheless, the *fin de siècle* almost inevitably led Iowans to take stock of the progress their state had made since white settlement began in the 1830s.

When they looked to the past, they marveled at the changes that had occurred in only a few decades; nonetheless, when they tried to glimpse the future, their outlook was not altogether optimistic.

The 1890s, curiously referred to as the "Gay Nineties," were among the most tumultuous eras in American history. A



**Images of the 1890s speak of unemployment, disparities in income, labor struggles. From left: "Kelly's Industrial Army"—some 1,500 unemployed workers from San Francisco, victims of the 1893 depression—march through Council Bluffs on their way across Iowa en route to Washington, D.C., in 1894. Barefoot children on a farm near Independence, Iowa, contrast with the**

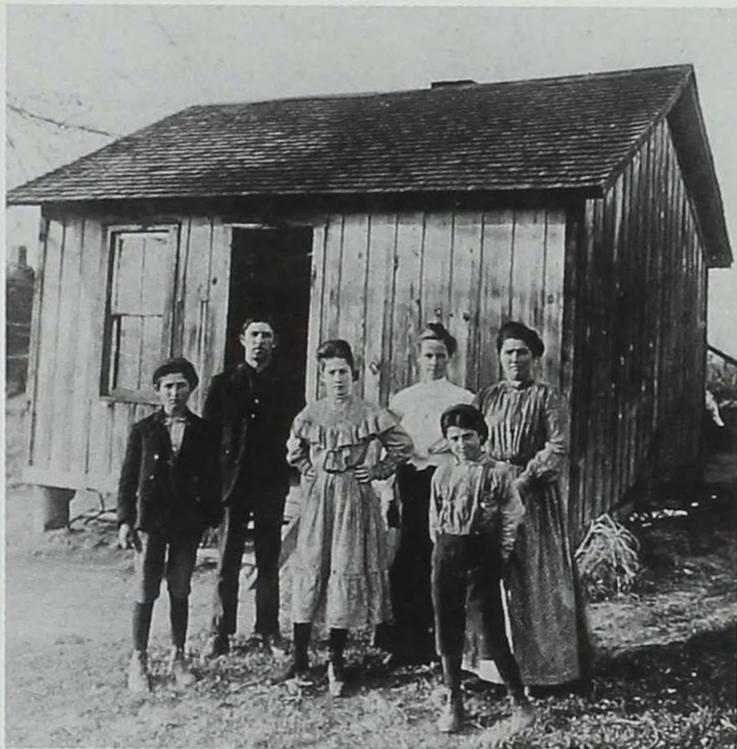
wrenching financial depression, waves of strife between labor and capital, a vast influx of immigrants, and the Populist insurgency of disgruntled farmers convinced many Americans that their society was changing rapidly—and not necessarily for the better. The closing of the western frontier prompted hand-wringing that the wellspring of American distinctiveness and democracy had dried up; a few years later, the United States opened a new frontier of sorts by embarking on a war for imperial conquest against Spain. At century's end, many Americans' faith in unbounded progress was sorely tested, if not altogether broken.

The turbulent political and economic currents of the 1890s powerfully affected Iowa's annual state fair. The Populist movement, which garnered strength in the 1880s and 1890s as it organized farmers in Iowa and the rest of the nation, ran counter to many of the tenets of economic development espoused by the state fair's organizers, who generally favored railroads and sought to diversify Iowa's economy by encouraging the growth of manufacturing. Most of the society's officers were anxious about the growing clout of the populist movement and its People's Party, whose advocacy of stringent regulation of business corporations ran counter to their booster ethos. As early as the 1880s, John R. Shaffer, the secretary of the Iowa State Agricultural Society, the private corporation that oversaw the fair, warned ominously that Populism threatened to "rupture" American politics. While the Farm-

ers' Alliance was not as potent in Iowa as in portions of the South and Great Plains, it was influential enough that the state fair's managers permitted it to host meetings on the grounds during fair week throughout the 1880s and 1890s.

Furthermore, as a result of the economic turmoil of the period, the Iowa State Agricultural Society became mired deep in debt in 1893 and never regained solid financial footing. Hard times often made it impossible for the fair to meet its expenses, or even to pay premiums to its prize-winners. Economic difficulties in the 1890s also brought long-standing debates about the fair's proper role to a head. Disagreements over whether the fair should emphasize educational exhibits or offer more amusements divided both the fair's organizers and Iowans generally. The fair was suffering from a growing sense that agricultural fairs were fast becoming yet another relic of the pioneer era.

Ironically, from its inception, the Iowa State Fair had been devoted to progress, and had displayed Iowans' finest achievements and the most up-to-date agricultural knowledge and technology. The inaugural Iowa State Fair was held in Fairfield in October 1854. In his oration, lawyer George C. Dixon of Keokuk declared that the fair's opening marked the beginning of "an era in our state," and established a benchmark from which subsequent progress would be measured. The fair not only afforded farmers an opportunity to learn about new farming techniques and



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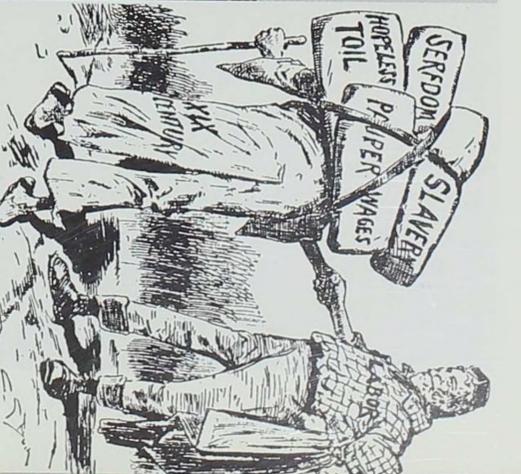
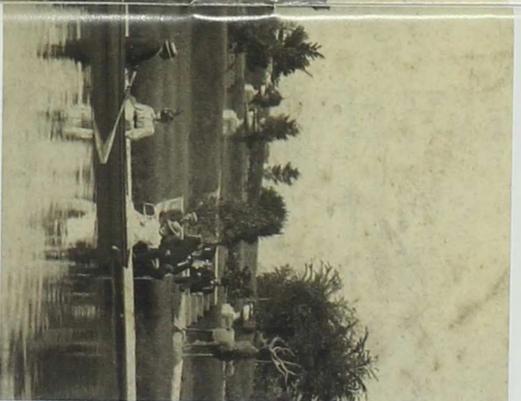
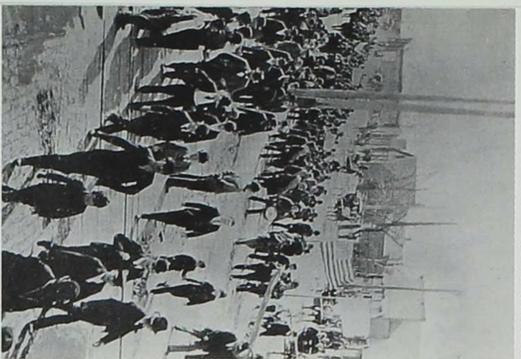
As the annual measure of Iowans' attainments, the fair grew along with the young state. During its first 25 years, the fair was moved to a new location every other year, in order to afford more Iowans at least an occasional opportunity to attend. As settlers filled the state's western counties, many Iowans began to urge that a permanent, centrally located fairgrounds be created. Des Moines, the state's capital city, was both centrally located and well served by railroads. The fair was moved to Brown's Park in Des Moines in 1879, and to its permanent grounds on the city's east side in 1886. The acquisition of a permanent fairgrounds led the fair's organizers, and many Iowans, to anticipate a much more impressive fair in the future, and the Iowa State Agricultural Society and private exhibitors immediately began constructing buildings on the impressive new fairgrounds, which grew like a small city. Expectations for the fair ran high in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

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sively every ten years, precisely on January 1. History, of course, is seldom so tidy. The gloomy tenor of the 1890s, for example, seems to have been established in 1893, as Americans suffered a wrenching financial depression at the very moment that they were taking stock of the nation's progress and future.

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The 1893 World's Fair was also the site of the American Historical Association's convention. At the convention, Frederick Jackson Turner, a 33-year-old historian, delivered "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," perhaps the single most influential paper in the annals of American historical scholarship. A longing for a bygone era suffused Turner's famous "frontier thesis." The 1890 U.S. Census had revealed that, for the first time in American history, no uninhabited lands remained for pioneers to settle. Be-



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cause Turner, like many Americans, believed that the experience of westward expansion and the encounter between pioneers and raw wilderness was the source of American distinctiveness and democracy, he fretted that the absence of land would worsen inequality and give rise to class antagonisms. Amid the political and economic turmoil of the 1890s, the "closing" of the frontier exacerbated many Americans' sense of foreboding as the century drew to a close.

Nevertheless, the World's Fair in Chicago dazzled some 27 million visitors (in a nation with a population of 67 million!) with its celebrated "Midway Plaisance" chock full of entertainments, and its exhibits of the most advanced products of American industry. The fair's exhibits afforded visitors a glimpse of a future filled with technological wonders.

Competition from the 1893 World's Fair, which especially attracted visitors from Iowa's eastern counties, coupled with the onset of the depression and hard times for farmers, plunged the Iowa State Fair deep into debt in 1893. The enormous World's Fair not only siphoned away receipts from the Iowa State Fair, but made state and county fairs seem tiny and humdrum by comparison. Well into the 20th century, the Columbian Exposition's fabled White City and Midway would cast their shadow over midwestern state and county fairs. Smaller fairs would even whitewash their buildings, touting their wooden exhibition halls and barns as a miniature "White City," and they soon advertised their own "Midways" in order to lure fairgoers in search of entertainment. The organizers of the Iowa State Fair complained that "it will be an uphill business for state and county fairs for some time to come," at least until the memory of the World's Columbian Exposition was forgotten.

Despite efforts to book attractions that would lure patrons to the fair, the state fair remained mired in debt in 1894 as well; the Iowa State Agricultural Society, the private organization long responsible for organizing and operating the state fair, was forced to borrow money to meet its expenses. After the 1894 fair closed, the *Iowa State Register* suggested that "it is possible that we have come to the end of the road, as far as old-fashioned fairs are concerned. The demand of the present is for something new." Despite an impressive bill of entertainers and lavish advertising, hard times for farmers resulted in more hard times for the fair, which remained unprofitable in 1895 and 1896.

After four years of financially unsuccessful fairs,

the State Agricultural Society's 1897 convention was decidedly somber, and some of the society's members wondered aloud whether the fair would endure. One member of the fair's board of directors, John Cownie of South Amana, delivered an address on the question, "What Are the Causes of the Lack of Interest in the State Fair?" in which he likened the fair to a patient in a sickbed, suffering from the host of ailments that commonly accompany old age. The fair's original purpose, to provide farmers an opportunity to examine and purchase purebred stock and agricultural implements, was no longer necessary in an era in which agricultural periodicals circulated more widely and in which breeders and implement dealers could more easily reach their rural clientele.

As for the future, the fair's secretary, P. L. Fowler of Des Moines, asked whether the state fair ought to be discarded like "the other worn-out forms, usages and implements of the past ages," and replaced with a newer model, one that devoted more to entertainment than agriculture. Fowler was convinced that the only way to put the fair back in the black was to host an "up to date" fair, amply stocked with amusements. Fowler even inquired about booking J. A. Bailey's gargantuan traveling circus for the 1897 fair.

Bailey's circus was well beyond the fair's strained budget, but the fair's entertainment bill for 1897 did include Dr. Carver's High Diving Horses and trick shooting, the Kemp Sisters Wild West Show, and lacrosse matches between members of the Winnebago and Sauk and Mesquakie tribes, who also maintained a small village on the grounds, where they displayed dances and crafts for curious spectators. The 1897 fair, at least in comparison to its immediate predecessors, was a resounding success. When it was over, the agricultural society, which had begun the year nearly \$15,000 in debt, emerged \$49 in the black.

As the fair's organizers began to plan the 1898 exhibition, they confronted the prospect of competing once again with a world's fair, the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, scheduled to open in Omaha. Although considerably smaller than the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, this fair was even closer to Des Moines, and would surely attract Iowans from the western half of the state. The state fair's officers were understandably leery of repeating their disastrous experience of 1893, but were also afraid that discontinuing the fair for even one year would be yet another embarrassment to the society.

Pondering their options, Fowler argued that "we had just as well go in the hole with a fair as without." On April 13, however, the fair's board of directors

The Columbian Exposition in Chicago dwarfed state fairs across the nation, including Iowa's (below). The Manufactures Building (right) was one of several buildings at the 1893 World's Fair devoted to technological progress and cultural wonders. Fountains and lagoons, dramatically lit by electric lights at nights, laced the grounds and awed the fair's 27 million visitors. State fairs in Iowa and elsewhere could hardly compete.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

12 MANUFACTURES BUILDING

SHSI (DES MOINES)





SHS (DES MOINES)

To boost receipts in the late 1890s, the State Fair booked Dr. Carver's high-diving horses (above) and similar crowd-pleasers.

abruptly voted that because of the nearby world's fair "and the feeling existing over the state averse to holding a fair this year, therefore be it Resolved, That no fair be held by the Iowa State Agricultural Society in the year 1898."

For the first time in its 44-year history, the annual state fair, which had been held without interruption throughout the Civil War and the depressions of 1873 and 1893, was canceled. A few days later, after months of escalating diplomatic tensions, the United States declared war on Spain. On April 25, the State of Iowa took charge of the Iowa State Fairgrounds and converted it into a military encampment for the war's duration.

Meanwhile, as 1899 approached, the fair's organizers contemplated how to commemorate its last state fair of the century. In spite of several years of financial travail, the agricultural society's officers knew too well that stinginess with the fair's entertainment budget would diminish the fair's receipts. Accordingly, the Iowa State Agricultural Society booked Dr. Carver's renowned Diving Horses as the fair's main attraction, as well as many lesser acts. Advertisements for the fair in farmers' periodicals and newspapers proclaimed that "You Will Be Royally Entertained This Year."

The society's new secretary, George H. Van Houten, who had previously managed the Lenox District Fair in southwestern Iowa, was convinced that the 1899 fair needed a gimmick to make it more alluring to the public. Perhaps hearkening back to the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, Van Houten suggested that "we may have to resort to some extension of our fair and attach 'Exposition' or some other scheme that will enlarge our borders, on paper, at least, and our scope of work."

He suggested billing the fair as the "Closing Century Exposition," and including in it an array of historical exhibits of obsolete implements, over-fattened livestock (newer, scientific theories of animal husbandry suggested that leaner animals were both more economical to raise and produced superior meat), and other relics from the pioneer era, as well as exhibits designed to "try to show the development to the present time." Van Houten boasted that his theme for the fair would be inexpensive, compared with commercial entertainers: "It will cost us practically nothing to incorporate this idea and will gain us, in several ways, especially in having something new to advertise."

The agricultural society enlisted the assistance of Charles Aldrich, director of the Iowa Historical De-

partment, in mounting a suitable historical exhibit, and encouraged fairgoers to scour their attics and barns for items of historical interest to contribute to the display.

When the fair opened in late August 1899, the *Des Moines Leader* reported that never before had there been "such a scene of activity, so large a number of spectators, so many exhibits, side-shows, freaks, cane racks, supernatural wonders, unbelievable marvels, merry-go-rounds, steam organs, optical illusions and 'hop-ale' stands." Yet amidst the "endless, confused landscape of tents and stands and shanties" were legitimate educational and commercial exhibits as part of the "closing century" theme. Implement dealers, by far the fair's largest commercial exhibitors, had obliged the fair organizers by displaying outmoded plows and threshers alongside their brand-new counterparts. Exhibits of women's dresses and handicrafts and tools reminded the fair's visitors of the remarkable changes that had occurred in only a few decades, and inspired admiration for the hardships endured by the state's early settlers. As the *Leader* expounded, "The end-of-the-century exhibit, showing curios of half a century and a century ago—spinning wheels, looms, primitive agricultural implements, homespun goods, old-fashioned clothing, bridal gowns of the era of the second war with England, firearms and other weapons a century old, and scores of other interesting relics—alongside their counterparts of the present generation, is one of the most instructive and interesting sections of the show. Contributions have been received from all quarters of the state."

Some fairgoers found the historical exhibits an edifying antidote to the fair's sideshows. The *Leader* hailed the Closing Century Exposition as "intrinsically better worth seeing than its predecessors," noting that it furnished "an interesting contrast between the appliances, processes and methods of life today, and those of the earlier years of the century."

George C. Duffield, one of the state's most prominent settlers, traveled by train from Keosauqua to visit the fair. Duffield, who served as superintendent of the fair's swine exhibits for some twenty years beginning in the 1870s, could plausibly boast that he had attended more Iowa State Fairs than anyone alive. He wrote in his diary that the 1899 fair reminded him of the old-time fairs from the 1870s. The Closing Century Exposition was also a financial success, and the State Agricultural Society closed the century with more

than \$16,000 in its treasury, its first significant surplus since 1891.

The Closing Century Exposition in 1899 was not merely a savvy bit of advertising, but marked a watershed in the fair's role. In earlier decades the fair had been touted as a display of the most advanced agricultural methods available to farmers; the fair's managers had discouraged the display of outworn items and ideas, instead urging farm men and women to adopt labor-saving machines and become familiar with scientific agriculture and home economics. At the end of 1890s, however, the fair became somewhat more backward-looking, more nostalgic. In part this resulted from Iowans' growing awareness of their state's history, which was now long enough for them to take stock of its development since the frontier era. As the pioneer generation receded into the past, Iowans became wistful about the passing of a generation of the "old settlers" who had staked the first claims, broken the prairie, and established homes and communities. (Similarly, early 19th-century Americans lamented the passing of the nation's "Founding Fathers," and contemporary Americans have lamented the passing of the World War II generation.) The 1899 Closing Century Exposition was Janus-faced, gazing wistfully back to the past while surveying the future for the promise of further progress.

Progressive farming techniques would continue to be displayed at the fair, of course. But in the years ahead, the organizers of the fair would acknowledge what *Billboard*, the national entertainment magazine, predicted in December 1899: "The day of the purely agricultural fair is past."

So were the days of the Iowa State Agricultural Society as hosts of the state fair. The society had learned repeatedly in the 1890s that the state fair was susceptible to economic depressions, rival attractions, poor weather, and other difficulties. Nor could the society hope to stage a suitable fair, maintain (let alone improve) its grounds, and pay its other expenses solely from yearly gate receipts. As a result, many of the society's members now conceded that the task of hosting a modern state fair was simply too great to be shouldered by a private organization.

In early 1900, with the Society's recommendation, full control of the fairgrounds and its future improvements shifted to the newly formed state Department of Agriculture. The fair's receipts and expenses would be distinct from the department's other finances, and the fair was expected to be self-supporting. In fact, the state's assumption of responsibility for the fair made

debates over state funding for improving the grounds and covering the fair's shortfalls much less contentious, and paved the way for a massive program of construction on the fairgrounds over the next three decades

When the 1902 fair opened that summer, the *Des Moines Register and Leader* proclaimed it "A TWENTIETH CENTURY STATE FAIR," in which a well-appointed fairground with permanent buildings had replaced shanties and tents. According to the paper, the improvements in the fairgrounds and in its exhibits marked the beginning of "a new era in such exhibitions," which would only grow more instructive, entertaining, and impressive in the future.

A few years later, *Billboard* published a whimsical article, "The State Fair in 2000," predicting that at the end of the millennium, fairgoers would sail to glass-domed fairgrounds in private "aero-cars." The fairgrounds of the future would rely on technology to bring exhibits to the fairgoers, sparing them from the need to walk in the summer heat. In the livestock pavilion, cattle would be displayed in sanitary, rotating glass stalls. Hundreds of vaudeville acts would perform atop a moving panorama to entertain the fair's patrons throughout the grounds.

At the end of the 20th century, the Iowa State Fairgrounds scarcely resembles the futuristic city envisioned by *Billboard*, but technological changes have altered Iowans' lives more profoundly than even the magazine's fanciful glimpse of the year 2000 dared envision. Yet a hundred years earlier—at the end of a decade marked by economic depression, labor unrest, and the closing of the frontier—Iowans at the 1899 Closing Century Exposition gazed nostalgically back at the American pioneer era, where they envisioned their forebears and themselves as the founders of a vibrant economy and civilization. ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary sources include the *Des Moines Register and Leader*, *Billboard* magazine (which began publishing in 1894), and the annual reports of the Iowa State Agricultural Society. This article developed from a portion of the author's dissertation, "State Fair: Culture and Agriculture in Iowa, 1854-1941" (Rutgers, 1992), forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press as *Carnival in the Countryside*.



*Iowa State Fairgoers  
Looked Back at the Past  
in the 20th Century, Too*



FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS: SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Echoing the "looking back" theme of the 1899 "Closing Century Exposition," the state fair in 1938 (the centennial of Iowa Territory) featured historical period rooms created by the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs. Above: Mrs. Ewing Hertzler in the Burlington club's "territorial" room.



In 1946, the centennial of statehood, the Iowa State Fair featured a historical exhibit of farm equipment and vehicles. Upper left: N. E. Daggett kneels to examine an early plow while B. J. Clark and R. L. Longley look on. Above: J. F. Bailey Jr. sets up a McCormick reaper, and E. F. Pittman builds a rail fence.

At the 1950 State Fair, Farm Bureau women from Mahaska, Madison, and Wayne Counties assembled rooms depicting life in 1900. Left: Mrs. Edgar Moore crochets while Earle Henderson listens to the phonograph.