

# Fair Week 1939

Well, the county fair is on,” crowed the *Marshalltown Times-Republican*. “If you have been feeling jittery leave that feeling out on the back forty and find reassurance and the happiness that comes from that assurance thru the county fair.”

Iowans had every reason to feel jittery early in September 1939. The front-page headlines were chilling:

*Hitlerism Must Be Destroyed  
Allies Have Lost 14 Ships at Sea  
England Declares War on Germany  
Polish Munitions for Western Front  
Russia And Japan Reach Armistice*

Still, this didn't seem to stop folks from attending the Central Iowa Fair. Nor did Monday's rain—"the old bugaboo" of fair week—nor the heat, which sizzled between 97 and 99 mid-week, forcing principals to let schools out at noon.

Arthur Rothstein, a Farm Security Administration employee, was assigned by the federal government to photograph rural America in the 1930s. Sometime during fair week in Marshalltown, he documented this near-sacred midwestern tradition by shooting candid scenes of fair-goers, the women in flowered dresses, the men in white shirts and ties.

Occasionally in the photos here, you'll spot an individual—a tall ticket-taker or a dark-haired man on a bench—who is staring right at Rothstein's camera, and thus at us, some 70 years in the future.

But most of the people at the 1939 fair seem oblivious to the photographer, the heat, and the war simmering in the local headlines.

— Ginalie Swaim, editor









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BOTH PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



As the newspaper said, farm kids “scrubbed, brushed and pampered” the livestock they raised, then showed them proudly at the fair, hoping to impress the judges and win awards. Then the kids had one more chance to show off their livestock—in the auction ring, where the animals were sold to the highest bidders and eventually sent to the slaughterhouse.











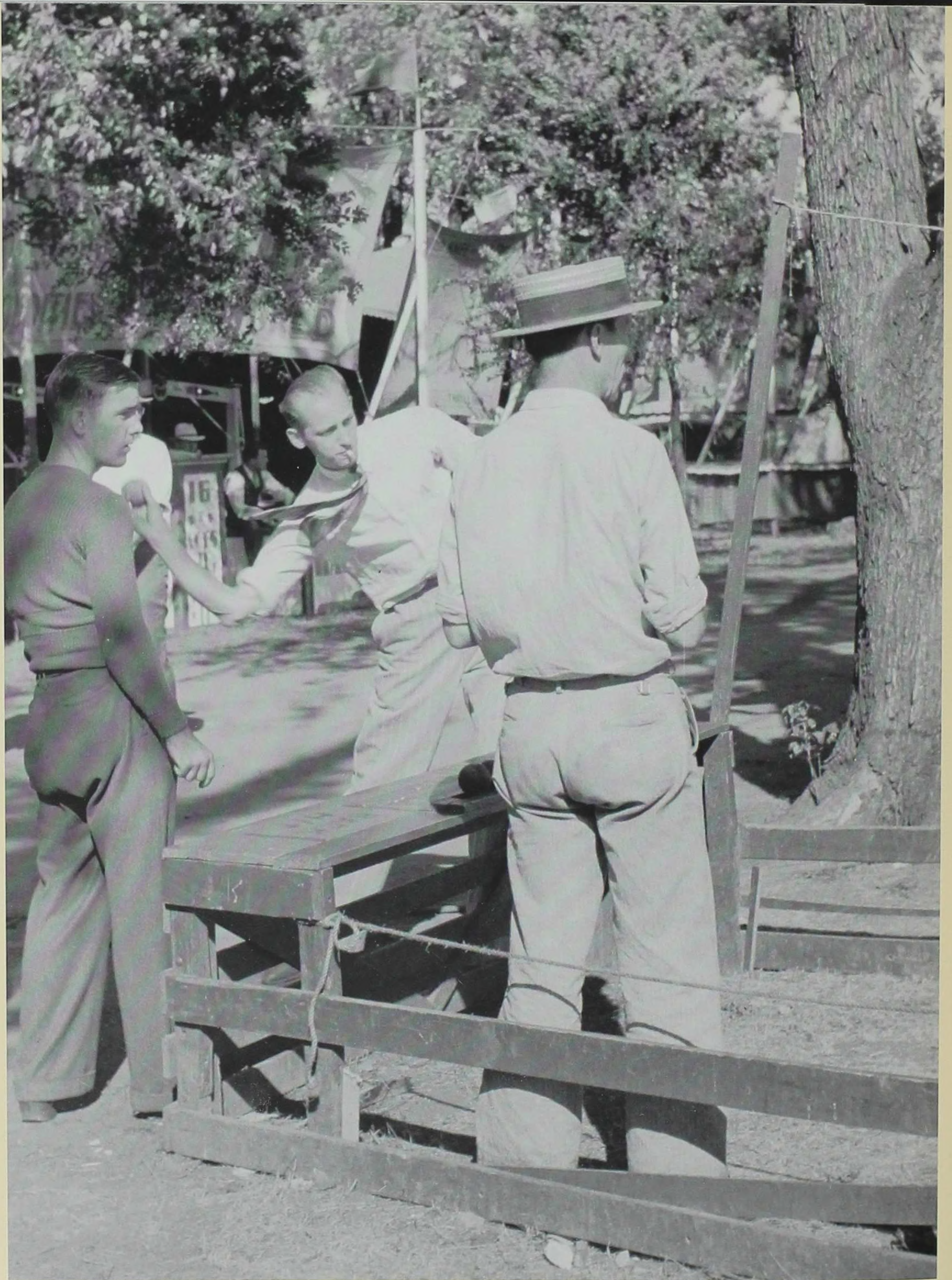




Like all fairs, this one was about innovation and commerce as well as entertainment. Above: A salesman explains the merits of a self-feeder for hogs, freeing up the farmer from the daily chore of lugging buckets of feed to the hog troughs.

Left: Farm women read up on rural electrification. On the same day that the fair started, the local paper reported that 7,000 more miles of electricity lines were to be constructed in rural Iowa, bringing electricity to 60,000 more farm families. Farm women would benefit more than male farmers from this new source of power.





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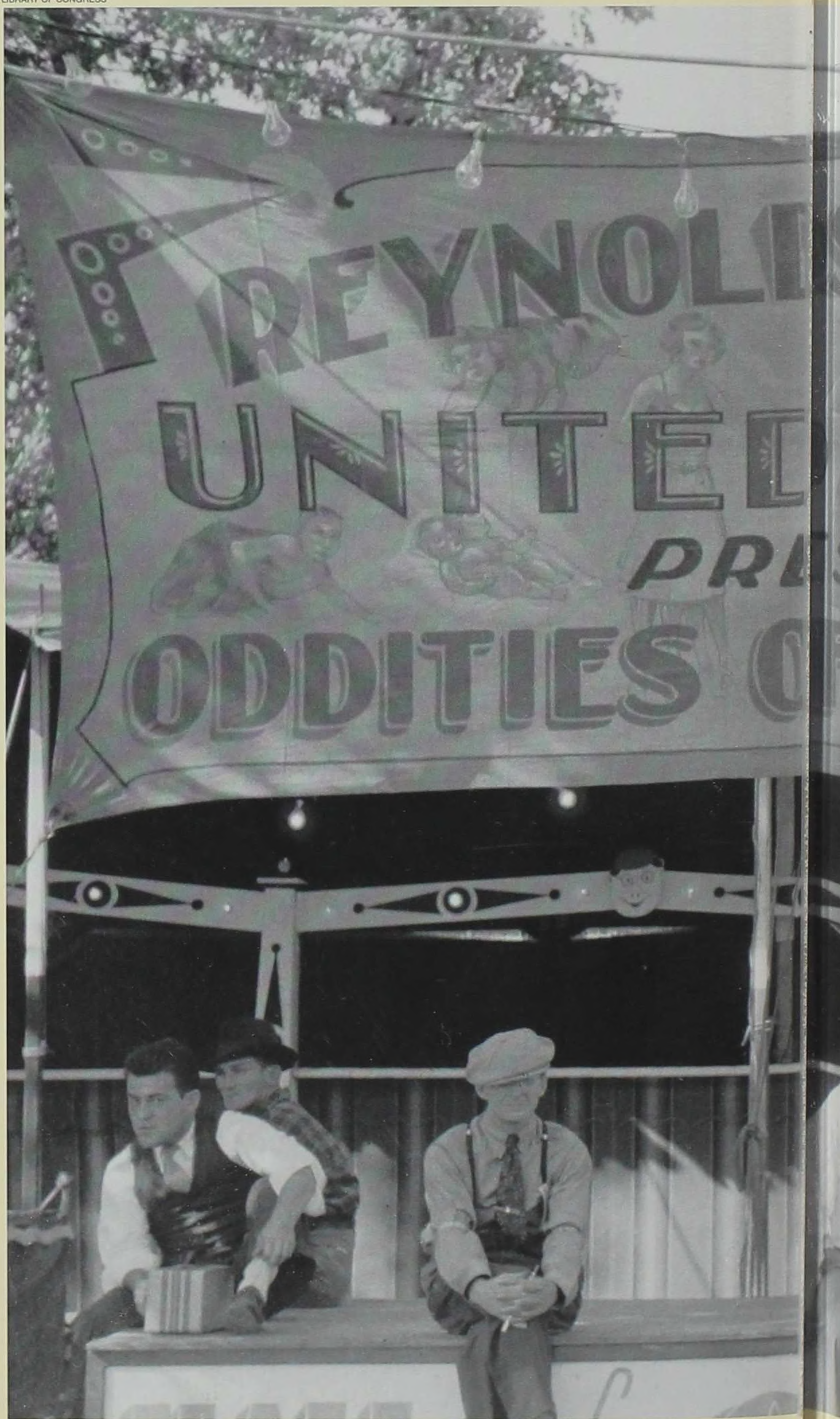
Above: Well, some dads will pop for the dime ticket to take their curious sons into a sideshow of gorillas, grave robbers, and other scary creatures—while some dads (photo on right) just steer their sons right past it.

Left: Cigarette in mouth and tie flying, a fellow tries his skills with a baseball.

The Marshalltown newspaper advertised the 1939 “Glittering Midway” as “streamlined” and “the like of which you have never seen . . . Rides, Slides, Thrills, Shows.” Perhaps the midway glittered at night, but Arthur Rothstein photographed it during the day, when the streets were dusty and only little boys seemed thrilled with the shows.

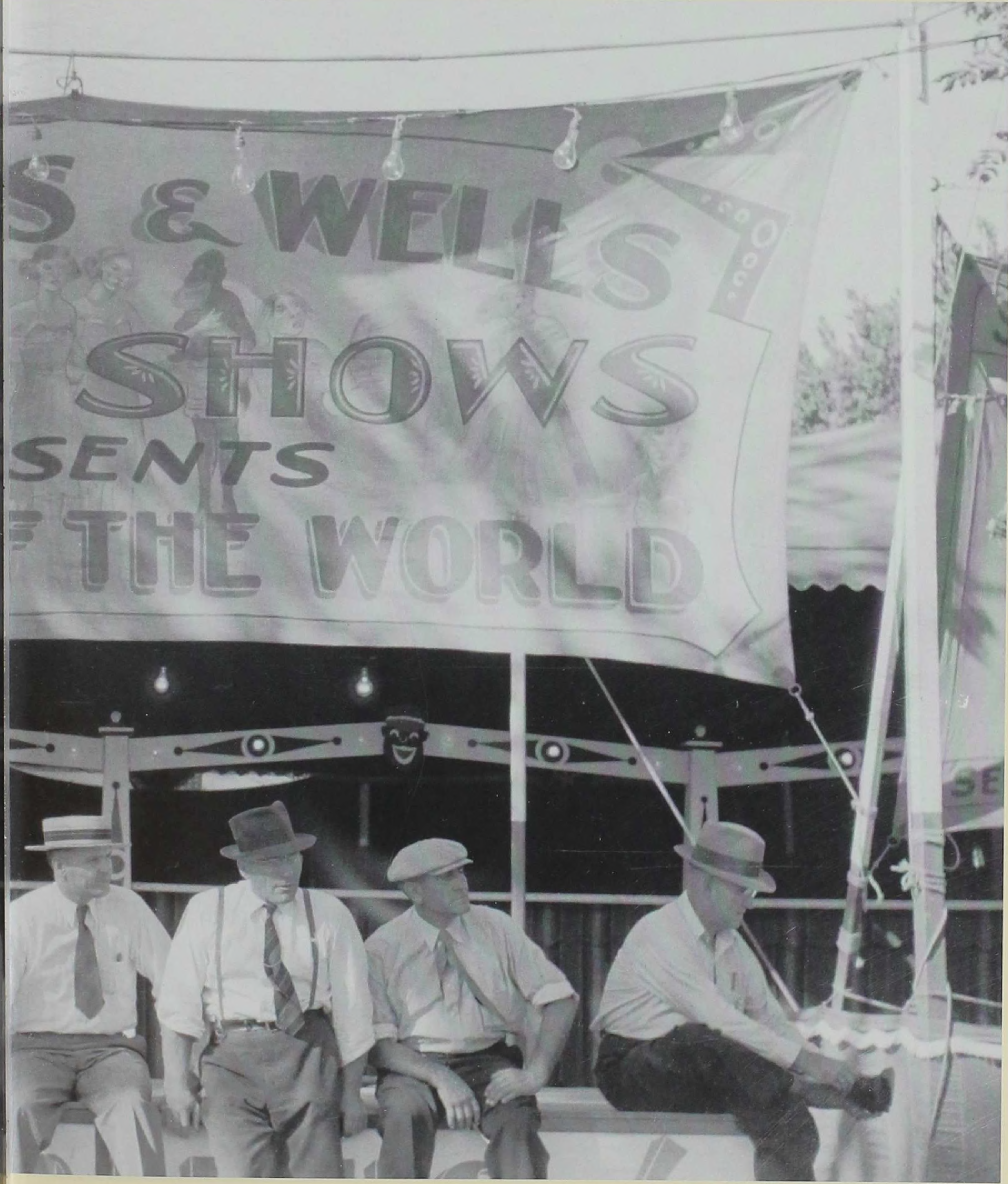






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