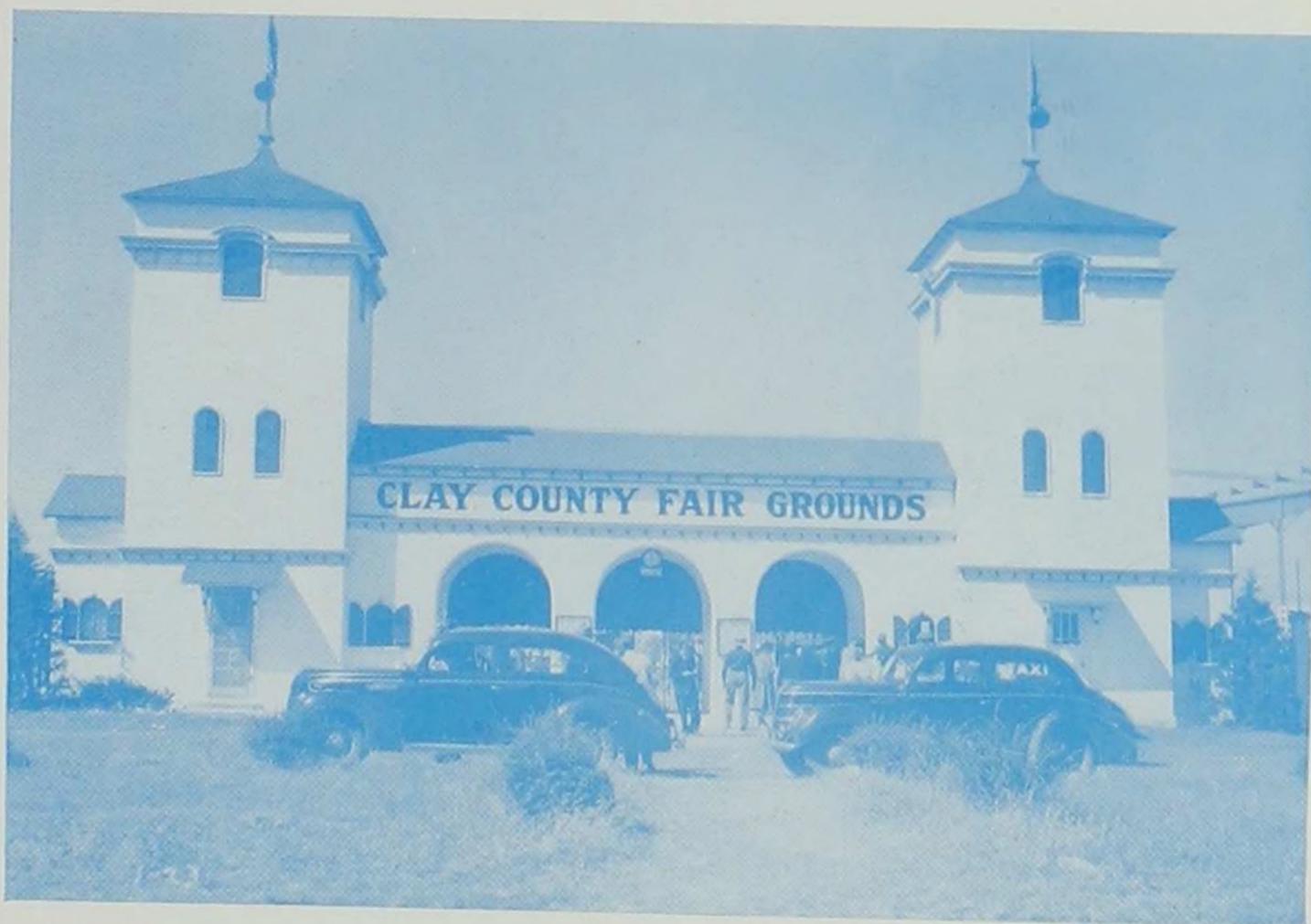
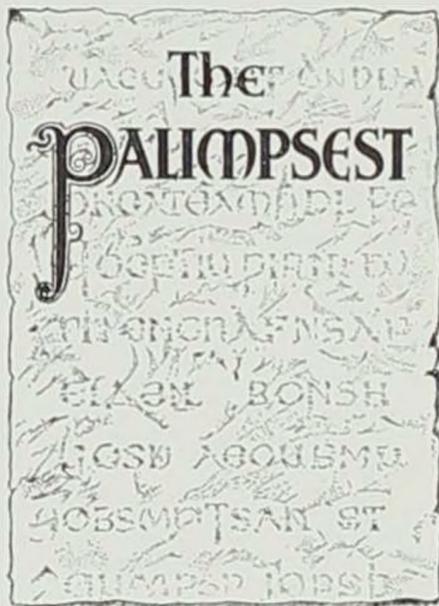


*The*  
**PALIMPSEST**



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## The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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MARGARET POLLOCK

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## Cover

*Front* — Main Entrance to Clay County Fair.

*Back — Inside:*

*Top* — Presidents: Roy G. Webb (1918-26); H. Bruce Noll (1927-39); I. N. Kirby (1940-45); Leon W. Witter (1946-50).

*Center* — Clay County Fair Board (with some wives) leave on annual trip to Chicago to buy entertainment for 1950 fair.

*Bottom* — Secretaries: Leo Dailey (1927-37); J. Howard Peterson (1938-41); Wm. J. Knipe (1946); Wm. P. Woods (1948-50).

*Back — Outside:*

Airview of 1949 Clay County Fair, showing half-mile dirt track, grandstand and bleachers, Midway, new buildings, parking lot.

*Insert* — Airview of grounds before World War II.

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# THE PALIMPSEST

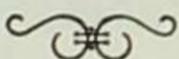
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## Fairs of Homestead Days

The agricultural fair as it is known in the United States is a peculiarly American product. It is entirely unlike the Old World market fair. Although it was modeled in the beginning after the English cattle show, the American agricultural fair in its combination of exhibits, instruction, and amusement developed along different lines. An enterprising New Englander, Elkanah Watson, founder of the Berkshire society for the holding of cattle shows, has generally been recognized as the "father of the agricultural fair." Watson aided in starting similar fairs not only in New England, but in states as far west as Ohio.

It was natural that agricultural fairs should flourish in Iowa. The first State Fair was held at Fairfield in 1854, and many county agricultural societies had instituted their own fairs before the outbreak of the Civil War. In the years that followed, agricultural fairs were established in every Iowa county. Some flourished while others gradually fell by the wayside.

The Iowa legislature has generally aided counties in staging their fairs. The Fifty-third General Assembly, for example, appropriated \$175,000 annually to aid agricultural fairs for the years 1949-1951. No single county was to get more than \$2,200.

In 1949 a total of ninety-three county and district or regional fairs was held in the Hawkeye State. Of all the county fairs that have been held in Iowa over the past quarter century, none can compare with the Clay County Fair at Spencer, which proudly claims to be the "World's Greatest County Fair."

The Clay County Fair grew out of a series of homestead era fairs, agricultural society expositions, a state high-wheel-bicycle meet, a trotting association, and community barbecues and picnics. The first fair was held in Spencer in 1871. This was only five years after the pioneer settlers — John F. Calkins, Stephen C. Calkins, Wales R. Lamberton, Byron Hough, and Harvey Mars — drove their covered wagons from Wisconsin to Spencer Grove and "put up cabins of small logs covering them with slabs of elm bark."

The Calkins brothers, both Civil War veterans, "had for the journey a yoke of oxen and a yoke of cows pulling a covered wagon." The party had wintered in a cottonwood grove "just below the hamlet of Emmetsburg." While there, they were told of Spencer Grove, a stretch of fifty acres of

choice timber on Iowa's sod-house frontier. This fine tract of government land was uninhabited, and the Wisconsin emigrants quickly selected it as an ideal spot on which to settle that spring.

During the summer of 1866 James Mars, Romain Hough, Solomon Wells, and the Reverend D. N. Coats and his son staked out their claims at Spencer Grove. They were soon followed by John W. Masten, F. M. Wells, Homer and Anson Calkins, and John Masterman. In a few short months Spencer Grove had become a thriving settlement.

The first schoolhouse was built in Spencer in 1869. The *Clay County News* was established in 1870 at Peterson but was removed to Spencer in 1871 when the county seat was changed from Peterson to Spencer. The survey of the original plat of Spencer was made in 1871; the town itself was incorporated in 1880. The Methodist Episcopal and Congregational churches were incorporated in 1872. The *Spencer Reporter* made its first appearance in 1878.

It was amid such bustle and activity that the first county fair was held at Spencer. Mrs. Elnora Thuirer, a resident of Spencer in 1870, has a beautifully printed diploma awarded by the Clay County Agricultural Society to her grandmother, Mrs. Jane Auringer, for the best tomato and muskmelon sauces. It was dated October 5, 1871, and signed by J. B. Edmunds, secretary, and B. P. Hough, president.

Lou B. Peeso, who has lived in Spencer longer than any present resident and who is the son of a pioneer settler, is the only person left who remembers that early fair. It took place just south of what is now Lincoln junior high and grade school. Asked if there were any buildings for the fair, Peeso laughed and said: "Just a few posts to tie the stock to, and some tables for the culinary exhibits." He also recalled a circular race track that came almost up to the one-room school that stood on the site. A half-mile running track, in a straight line, was located to the east of what is now Second Avenue East. Men brought their fine horses from as far away as Sioux Rapids, Peterson, and Emmetsburg to enter them in the running races.

In 1874, after this pioneer fair had been held three times, the grasshopper plague struck northwestern Iowa. Clay County was devastated by the scourge. According to W. C. Gilbreath, a local historian, a bountiful crop seemed assured, when all at once swarms of grasshoppers blackened the skies. Soon the earth was covered with them. From field to field they went, devouring crops and leaving many farmers poverty stricken. As Gilbreath relates:

Their source of revenue was gone, and even their potatoes, cabbages, turnips, and other vegetables which they intended to live upon during the coming winter were taken from them. They grew disheartened and gathered together their few effects, started for the East in search of employ-

ment, leaving behind them the farms on which they had spent time and toil, and had almost lived upon long enough to acquire a title. Many remained, however, being more fortunately situated than those whom necessity required to go elsewhere to seek sustenance. An impression prevailed that the grasshoppers would make annual visits to this section, and it required several years to disabuse this belief.

The coming of the railroad in 1878 helped overcome the fear of grasshoppers and turned the tide of settlers once more into Clay County. Soon people began talking about a county fair. On August 17, 1878, the *Clay County News*, edited and published by Charles McAllister and Marshall P. W. Albee, declared:

We heartily endorse all that can be said on the propriety and necessity of organizing and maintaining an agricultural society here for the exhibition of agricultural products. Our neighboring county of Emmet, with a much less population than Clay is maintaining a society and will hold an exhibition this year. Our products are varied and our capacity unlimited, and measures tending to stimulate activity in the several departments of the farm, creamery, orchard and kitchen, should be warmly and practically encouraged, and to back up the faith there is in us, we'll chip in fifteen dollars to help organize and maintain an exhibition here this fall. Now let the capitalists and farmers speak.

But the people's interest in the fall of 1878 was centered in another major event. On August 31 the *Clay County News* recorded: "Spencer is only ten miles from the terminus of the railroad. Before

another issue we will hear the engine whistle." On September 21 the same paper declared:

Last Saturday evening the people turned out in mass and gave the first passenger train that ever came into Spencer a hearty reception. The Spencer Cornet Band furnished music for the occasion. The train was to be in by 9:15 but for some reason was delayed for two hours. Nearly everyone remained and some one gathered a lot of fuel together and started a big bonfire, while the people were entertained by some lively music from the band until the train arrived at 11:15. The party cheered and the band played Hail Columbia, Yankee Doodle, and Red, White and Blue.

In 1879 the *Clay County News* announced that the County Agricultural Board would hold its first annual fair at Spencer on September 17, 18, and 19. Evidently taken to task by the *Spencer Reporter* for this statement, the editors of the *News* explained:

For the information of the young man who presides over the up-town journal, we will state that The News has always alluded to the recent fair as the first annual exhibition of the Clay County Agricultural Board because it was the first ever given by this society. The fact that Clay county held fairs — and good ones, too — during the years '71, '72, '73 was duly chronicled in the News at that time, but it now appears that the Reporter, with its usual alacrity as a news-gatherer, has just got around to report local matters only seven years old.

This 1879 fair, which was to continue annually until the early nineties, started out on land which was originally the Lamberton homestead north-

west of Spencer, and which is now partially incorporated in the west part of the present-day Clay County fairgrounds. A description of "OUR COMING FAIR," together with a bid for entries and exhibits, was printed August 30th in the *News*:

The attention of farmers, stock-raisers, horsemen and others is directed especially to Clay County's First Annual Fair to be held at the Fairgrounds, Sept. 17th, 18th and 19th. The premium list just printed is being distributed by the Secretary. It compares favorably with any in the Northwest. This list is quite large and the premiums offered in the various departments are very liberal. The new Fairgrounds comprise thirty acres of the most excellent land which will be suitably fitted up for Fair purposes. It is the intention of the Executive Committee to erect a Floral Hall, Judges' Stand and Amphitheatre sufficiently large to accommodate 700 people. The track is a half mile, and with a little labor can be made the finest in the State. It is 50 feet wide and is as level as a floor, and will be drained so as to prevent it becoming heavy after severe rains. The purses offered for running and trotting races amount to nearly \$400.00. Some of the purses are quite liberal and should bring some fast horses. A new department is the Educational Department which is under the supervision of County Supt. Gillespie. This has been prepared with special reference to our county educational interests. Every effort will be made on the part of the management to insure pleasure and satisfaction, and we earnestly hope every person in the county will endeavor to prepare something for the Fair. Farmers, bring your cattle, horses, hogs and farm produce and thus assist in making the coming Fair the best ever held in Northern Iowa.

The Board of Supervisors appropriated \$200 for the benefit of the Clay County Agricultural Board to assist in erecting fences and buildings, and in making necessary improvements. Traveling shows were required to pay fifty dollars to exhibit in the county when they charged fifty cents, and twenty-five dollars when they charged twenty-five cents admission. By the middle of September the fence around the fairground was finished, a fine judges' stand had been erected, and the floral hall, 24 by 36 and 12 feet high, was completed. The president, T. P. Bender, and secretary, W. C. Gilbreath, ran a column-length advertisement in the *News* for three consecutive weeks preceding the fair telling of "Over \$1200.00 offered in Premiums. \$400 for speed."

"County Fair Next Week and Don't You Forget It," people were admonished in print. Surrounding papers carried notices of the fair at Spencer, including the *Palo Alto Pilot*, the *Algona Republican*, the *Algona Upper Des Moines*, the *Sheldon News*, and the *Hancock Independent*.

The first call for cooperation between farmers and businessmen to support the fair (a call since often repeated) was made in 1879:

This is certainly an institution worthy of encouragement and one which every farmer and businessman interested in the future of the county should feel it his duty to aid and assist by being in attendance and bringing whatever articles or stock he has that are worthy of being exhibited.

No matter if your cattle or horses are not thoroughbreds, bring them. They may be the best exhibited. No opportunity has ever been given you before this to compare your stock and grain with that of all the county's. So now bring them along and let others see what kind of stock you keep and the quality of the grain you raise. The fair association has fitted up the ground in good shape and erected the necessary buildings. Now farmers and stockmen, do your part — bring on your stock and products and thus assist in making the first county fair a grand success.

The first fair given by the Clay County Agricultural Board opened Wednesday under favorable auspices at the fairgrounds a mile and a quarter northwest of Spencer. According to the *Clay County News*:

The attendance on the first day was not large. On Thursday, the second day, people came from all parts of the county and neighboring counties including Dickinson, Kossuth, Palo Alto, Buena Vista, O'Brien and others even to the numbers of a thousand or more. Considering that this is the first fair ever held in the county, we think the different departments as well represented as could have been expected. The show of Class B, cattle, in the line of stock was the best, though the show of horses, swine and sheep far exceeded our expectations. Class G, farming implements, stoves, hardware and tinware, was well represented. The exhibition of farm products, such as grain, vegetables, fruits, etc. was good. The display of fancy work was excellent and would compare favorably with that of older settled counties.

The half-mile running race on Thursday was

won by R. Jackson's sorrel stallion, Rally, in  $54\frac{3}{4}$  seconds. Martin Coonans' bay gelding took three out of five heats to win the trotting race.

More settlers moved into the Spencer area after 1879. The fair did "great good" in advancing farming and creating friendly rivalry among the breeders of good stock. One of the most ardent Clay County boosters was J. B. Edmunds, a land dealer and later a banker. In 1880 Edmunds declared:

On the cars you may be besieged by land agents and dealers from other towns of the grand state of Iowa, all of course wishing you to stop at their respective stations and look at the country. That is right and as it should be. Their lands are good and cheap, but we think ours takes the plum, all things considered, and think it for your interest to visit Spencer and Clay county first and then look at theirs and we are satisfied that you will return and buy in Clay county.

Therefore, do not take too much stock in the complacent chap who abideth at Sheldon, or the knowing wink of the Garner land man, or the way of the agent from Britt, or the sorrowful smile of the gentlemanly dealer from Algona, or the hurrah of the banker from Emmetsburg or the gentle words and manners of the party from Pattersonville. But stop off at Spencer and inquire of us.

To back up his claims, Edmunds declared that there had been no killing frosts in the fall to hurt the corn since 1858. Clay County was the best sheep county in the United States. "Try it and be convinced that the same sheep here will shear

one-third more wool than in Wisconsin and Illinois; and there is never anything the matter with them. . . . Watermelons grow large and bounteous. . . . Cabbages grow as large as a half bushel and made into kraut taste better and smell as bad as your smaller cabbages. . . . Our wild hay makes as good quality and as fine flavored butter as is made in the world."

T. P. Bender was the fair president from 1879 until January 1, 1886. He is the father of three present-day Spencer residents — C. C. Bender, Ed Bender, and Fred Bender. Gilbreath was secretary until 1887. James O. West, J. W. Stebbings, and W. H. Webb were subsequent presidents. The latter is the father of Roy Webb, the first president of the current Clay County Fair founded in 1918. I. F. Constant was an early secretary; F. M. Tuttle and M. E. Griffin each served as treasurer; J. Q. Adams, J. E. Frances, J. G. West, W. L. Bender, F. T. Verharen, Dr. Charles McAllister, J. B. Edmunds, A. T. McCarger, and James Goodwin served at one time or another as directors of these old Clay County fairs.

At the time of the eleventh annual fair in 1889 the Clay County Agricultural Society printed a 64-page premium book offering over \$2,000 in premiums. The following men and women served as superintendents of the twenty different divisions:

Cattle	F. B. Ryerson
Horses	B. F. Felt
Swine	George Langlois
Poultry	Frank Squires
Sheep	F. T. McKee
Marshal	D. C. Gillispie
Dairy	George Andrews
Floral Hall	S. S. Snow
Farm Products	John Adams
Farm Implements	A. S. Weir
Manufacturers' List	C. W. Culver
Mercantile Display	M. C. Remsberg
Speed Ring	A. W. Sleeper
Stall and Feed Agent	Peterson Johnson
Canned Fruits	Mrs. L. C. Wescott
Aviary	Mrs. Harvey Jones
Cookery	Mrs. J. G. West, Mrs. A. A. Flint
Art Gallery	Mrs. S. S. Snow, Mrs. J. Q. Adams
Textile Fabrics	Mrs. E. D. Pennock, Mrs. W. L. Bender
Flowers	Mrs. S. S. Adams, Mrs. E. B. Higley

It was such cooperation that made possible the success of those early fairs. It was this same spirit that carried the idea on through various forms of entertainment to the modern fair.

MARGARET POLLOCK

## Bicycles, Trotters, Barbecues

Bridging the years between one set of organized fairs and another were a series of major gatherings, some of which took place on the original half-mile dirt track at the fairgrounds northwest of the city. These can be classified into bicycle meets, horse races, and barbecues.

The 1888 meeting of the Iowa Division of the League of American Wheelmen, planned for July 18 and 19 at Spencer, was "unavoidably crowded into one day, the circus being here on the 18th occupying the streets and holding the attention of the people that day." Sixty-nine "dust begrimed riders, buoyant in spirits in anticipation of the good time, rolled into town" and were met by a reception committee and taken to the Earling Hotel headquarters. There were bicyclists everywhere, in uniform, semi-uniform, and no uniform. There were all sorts of wheels: the ordinary and safety, the nickel plated, semi-nickel plated and enameled, the crank and the ratchet, the small wheel in front, and the small wheel behind.

Main Street was decorated with home-made wheels — from the very diminutive to those of mammoth proportions and bearing the letters L. A. W. — League of American Wheelmen. The

riders, including four ladies, paraded noiselessly behind the Spencer Cornet Band from the business district to the fairgrounds.

Two state championship races were included in the six events of the afternoon which took place before a large crowd of spectators who enthusiastically cheered their favorites. "Deep dust on the track and a stiff breeze" made racing difficult.

In the half-mile state championship, C. C. Bender of Spencer "led from the start gradually widening the distance between himself and others until the home stretch was reached when J. B. Green of Des Moines, by a great spurt of speed, rapidly closed up the gap and came in a very close second."

The two-mile state championship race proved a stern test for the riders' staying powers. Archie A. McCoy, a lad of 16, led at the start, and soon placed a wide gap between himself and the other contestants. It was everywhere remarked that he could not maintain such a high rate of speed for two miles — but he did. And not until the last half mile, when J. B. Green began to gain on him, was the gap lessened. Finally, on the last quarter, Green by an unprecedented effort overhauled McCoy and passed under the wire — so say the judges — a few inches ahead. Others were positive McCoy was ahead. Time 7:55.

The evening event was a very imposing affair, and was witnessed by almost the entire population of Spencer and many from adjoining coun-

ties. About sixty wheels were in line, carrying from two to six Chinese lanterns each. At 9:30 p. m. the Spencer Cycling Club gave an excellent banquet to the visiting wheelmen at the Earling.

A year after the state bicycle race, the Spencer Trotting Association was formed and held its first races in August, 1889, on the fairground race track. The purpose of the organization was to encourage friendly rivalry among the owners of good horses and to encourage others to better their breeding stock. John Thayer was president; Frank Richardson, secretary; and M. C. Remsberg, treasurer, in 1889. These, and other enterprising citizens, had seen the fame that Axtell and Allerton had brought to Independence, Iowa, and doubtless hoped to win similar fame for Spencer.

In January of 1891, horse racing enthusiasts again made plans to sell stock at \$25 a share and organize "The Spencer Trotting Association" for the purpose of holding horse races on the fairgrounds of the Clay County Agricultural Society. Eighty-nine persons bought shares totaling \$2,225.

Race meetings were held on July 3 and 4, 1891. C. P. Buckey was president that year. In the two days treasurer E. Taggart took in a total of \$723.95 in gate receipts, \$48.26 for amphitheater tickets, \$470 for entrance money, and other smaller sums. Taggart paid out \$420 in purses, \$71 for judges and expenses, \$137.30 for paid advertising in turf papers, and returned on 89

shares of stock \$20, a total of \$1,780. The \$420 in purses stands in sharp contrast to the \$90,000 offered at Independence in 1891.

Activities at the fairground declined as Spencer felt the pinch of the panic of 1893. Newspapers made no mention of a fair or trotting matches during the late nineties.

Early in the new century, the community demanded a fair again. In their *History of Clay County*, published in 1909, Samuel Gillespie and James E. Steele wrote:

For the past three or four years another effort has been made by prominent citizens of Spencer to organize a fair association, and the project now seems on a fair way to fruition. Under a law passed at the last session of the legislature, the promoters of the proposition see their way toward ultimately shaping things so that in a short time Clay county will have its annual fair and be abreast of neighboring counties in that regard. Those taking the initiative in this project are E. L. Dickey, Harry Walters, B. F. Felt, Jr. and C. P. Buckey. Their plans are for the county to buy the necessary land, and then the association will do the rest. Two locations have been considered: A tract of land in the neighborhood of the tile factory, on the east border of Spencer, and land belonging to Frank Tuttle in the northwest part of town.

Nothing immediately developed from these efforts, but by 1913 Spencer merchants had organized a Clay County Fair and Picnic featuring a barbecue at noon. Jack L. Frank, then in the ice cream business and later a cafe man, was in



charge of the barbecue and recalls that the first year he roasted one steer, the second year — two steers, and the third — three steers. A barbecue house was erected in a dense grove in the southeast corner of the present fairgrounds.

On the day prior to the picnic, Mr. Frank recalls, E. O. Kabrick would bring his steam engine from his threshing outfit and would fire up the engine about 6 in the evening. Frank would place the quarters of meat on the racks, and live steam would be fed into the barbecue house. The men tended their meat all night and had it cooked by noon the next day for Gus Steigleder, head carver, a former butcher and then a cafe man, and his crew of men to cut and slice. Frank made hundreds of gallons of coffee.

The day's program on September 17, 1914, started at 8:30 in the morning with music by the Spencer band, followed by a plowing contest, a stock judging event, and a ball game between Peterson and Webb. All comers brought their own lunch baskets, and barbecued meat, coffee, pickles, and sugar were furnished by the merchants.

These picnics and barbecues led, after the intervening war years, into the modern Clay County Fair which was founded in 1918. Small as they were by contrast with the World's Greatest County Fair, they nevertheless met the demands of a community hungry for entertainment.

MARGARET POLLOCK

## Prelude to Glory

Sleek groomed cattle, soft woolly sheep, and huge scrubbed hogs fill row after row of stalls and pens in long barns. Four-H boys and girls busily wash, curry, and bed their young livestock. Bright-colored farm machinery for every conceivable purpose is put through smooth running operations by company men or interested farmers. The Midway is alive with children carrying colored balloons and eating pink cotton candy, high school boys trying the fastest and highest rides, old men and boys alike shooting moving ducks or tossing rings in hopes of winning a boudoir doll. Farm women and men hover near their booths of grain and vegetables assuring themselves that all is right. Spectators pack the grandstand watching breathlessly as racing autos barely miss piling up at the turn against the cement wall. Musical shows with lavish costumes and whirling choruses, exotic under the open sky, are spotlighted on a giant stage. Such is the colorful, shifting scene that makes up the "World's Greatest County Fair" at Spencer, Iowa.

The first of our modern Clay County fairs was held in 1918, just six weeks before the armistice of World War I. The enterprising promoters

were quick to capitalize on a patriotic theme. "Put a flag on your jitney and join!" The parade of floats representing "War Times" moved to the martial music of T. Fred Henry's military band. "The Battle of the North Sea," described by the press as "a gigantic spectacular production and grand popular patriotic display of fireworks," showed a German ship clashing with an Allied battleship and being sent to the bottom after a colorful struggle. Governor William L. Harding, Clay County Fair President Roy G. Webb, and T. H. Jones, first president of the Grandstand Association, spoke at the dedication ceremony of the 35-acre fairgrounds.

The modern fair had its origin at the election in the fall of 1916, when the people of Clay County authorized the supervisors to spend \$12,000 for the purchase of suitable grounds. By early 1917, a fair association was organized with a capital of \$18,000. Bonds were sold to farmers, purebred livestock breeders, and businessmen of the county for the purpose "of conducting annually one of the largest stock shows in northern Iowa." The land for the fairgrounds, purchased from Frank Tuttle, included the grove where the barbecues and county picnics had formerly been held.

E. S. Perry, the first secretary of the fair, recalled a decade later that the idea of a fair was first discussed at the third barbecue in Tuttle's Grove. Such men as C. P. Buckey, J. H. McCord,

Otto A. Bjornstad, E. S. Randall, and Bruce Noll were among the first to start the wheels rolling to secure grounds through the cooperation of the board of supervisors. Perry reminisced:

I remember Mr. Robinson, representing a firm in Des Moines, came to Spencer and furnished us with plans for a model fairgrounds and this plan he suggested was followed pretty much all the way through. Then began a series of meetings that many times lasted until the small hours of the morning where plans and suggestions were put forth and everyone had a better suggestion how to run a fair, when the fact of the matter was none of us knew a thing about how to run a fair but by going to other towns and visiting other fairgrounds, we finally got started on this wonderful fair. In these meetings everyone had an idea of his own as for instance, one wanted lots of barn room, and another lots of grand stand room, and another wanted a bigger race track and so on; and always we thought we were building big enough for years and years to come but how little we knew has been proven by the additions and enlargements that have been made as time went on.

The first fair was held September 24 to 27, 1918. W. C. Bacon, who furnished the first fair with hippodrome attractions from F. M. Barnes, Inc., and who was subsequently the secretary of the second fair and for years starter at the races, recalls that the "Clay County fairgrounds were finished minutes before the gates were due to open. The morning of the opening day of the fair, I helped fair directors and other interested persons carry scraps of lumber out of the grounds

as the carpenters were pounding their last nails into place, desperately trying to finish so that the fair patrons could be seated for the afternoon featured events."

"The first small wooden grandstand was built in the middle of my oat field," Roy T. Pullen, a director for 28 years, recalls. A two-story women's building, later used for Arts and Crafts and now by 4-H girls, was ready for the first exposition. Joe Baker plowed the first furrow for the race track. According to E. S. Perry: "When we were building the race track we had no machine to level the track the way we thought it should be, and Joe Baker came to my house one evening and told me he had the plan and said he had found a piece of railroad iron that we dragged in from the country and hooked behind two cars and this way the track was smoothed the first time." A year later, C. P. Buckey, first vice-president of the fair, boasted that this was the "best half mile track in the northwest." At that first fair, Red Bearer, a bay gelding driven by C. Hardie of Des Moines, took the free-for-all pace in straight heats, winning the first in 2:08.5, a record that stood for years. Mr. Hardie became one of the best-liked drivers on the track.

A distinguishing feature of this vitally important 1918 fair was the ability, energy, vision, and persistence of the men who founded it. Roy G. Webb, livestock man and farmer, was president

of the fair through 1926. H. Bruce Noll, farmer and bank president, became the second president, serving from 1927 through 1939. I. N. Kirby, farmer and banker, headed the fair from 1940 through 1945. Leon W. Witter, banker, was elected fair president in 1946 and has been re-elected for the 1950 exposition.

Leading farmers and business and professional men have served as officials through the years. Of the original 1918 officials, Otto A. Bjornstad, second vice-president, and I. N. Kirby, third vice-president, served on the board until Mr. Bjornstad's death a few years ago and Mr. Kirby's retirement in 1945. Also among the original officers were E. S. Randall, fourth vice-president; Wilson Cornwall, treasurer; and J. E. McClurg, T. F. Jones, J. H. McCord, J. C. Baker, councilmen.

Besides those mentioned above, P. J. Cilley, I. F. Zimmerman, R. S. LaBrant, Earl Bassett, A. E. Anderson, J. A. King, Claude Pullen, Charles Gilmore, John F. Schoelerman, Harry Lawrence, Burt F. Rossiter, Robert Keir, Homer Clausen, and many other capable men have served on the board of directors, while other men and women have headed the various departments which now number twenty-three. Mrs. W. R. Higgins was chairman of plants and flowers for the 1918 fair; Mrs. R. L. Cobb, textiles and fabrics; Ruby Gibbens, canned goods; Mrs. Harry Glover, oven products; Mrs. Charles Doughty,

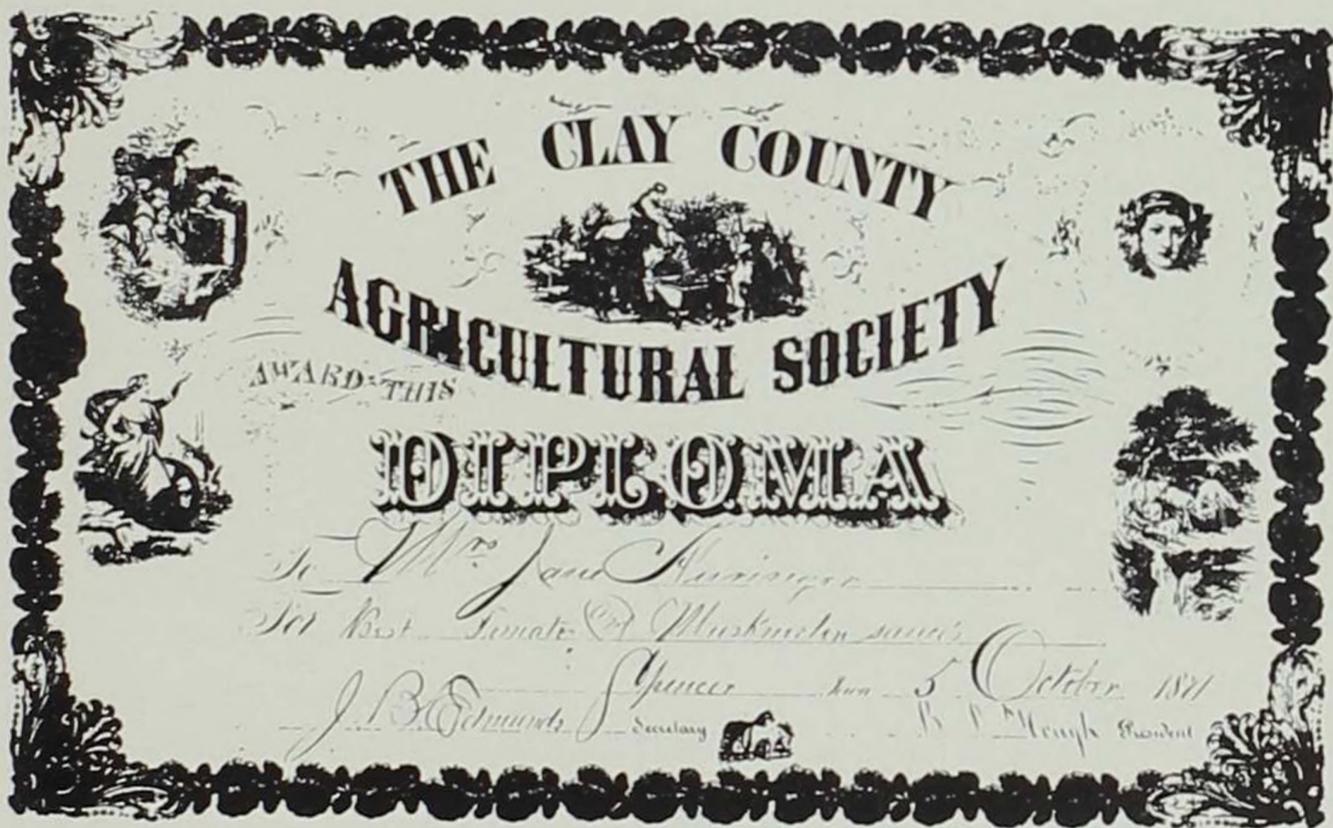
department of art. Many other women have taken an active part in the Clay County Fair.

Les. W. Emery, secretary of the fair from 1920 through 1923, brings to memory:

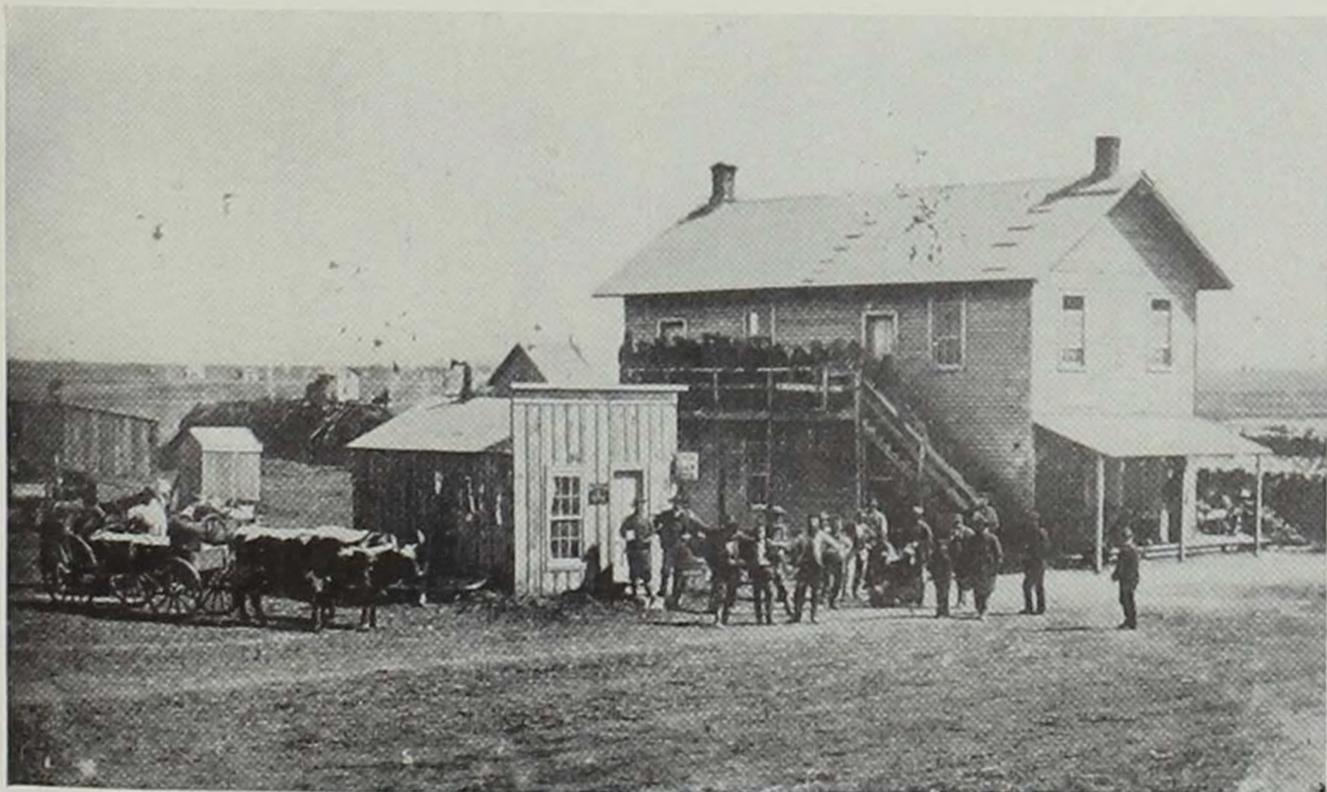
How dear old Bruce (Noll) would want more cattle stalls; old reliable Dave (Snyder) thought that the fair was only for his pigs; and Mrs. Howard King often mentioned the fact that the women were nearly as important as the pigs, but Dave generally out-talked her, and more pig pens were built. . . . Right now I can see (Jess) Becket taking in the money, piling it up — milk checks, washers and every thing that looks like money. . . . How much valuable space was given to the fair each year by the newspapers, and how little money was spent for this wonderful cooperation — and the great fair editions of the News-Herald (E. L. C. White, publisher) and how we all looked forward to the issue! . . . Just a word about my old organization: Mae (Cobb), Ella (Morgan), Joy (Roberts), P. F. (Cilley), (J. E.) McClurg, Doc. (G. G.) Baker, Becket and all the gang. How we did work — and oh, such fun (sometimes). No secretary ever had such a gang. Time cut no figure — everyone did his best to put things over.

With such leadership, vision, and devotion, the future success of the Clay County Fair was assured — time alone was needed to gain it national fame.

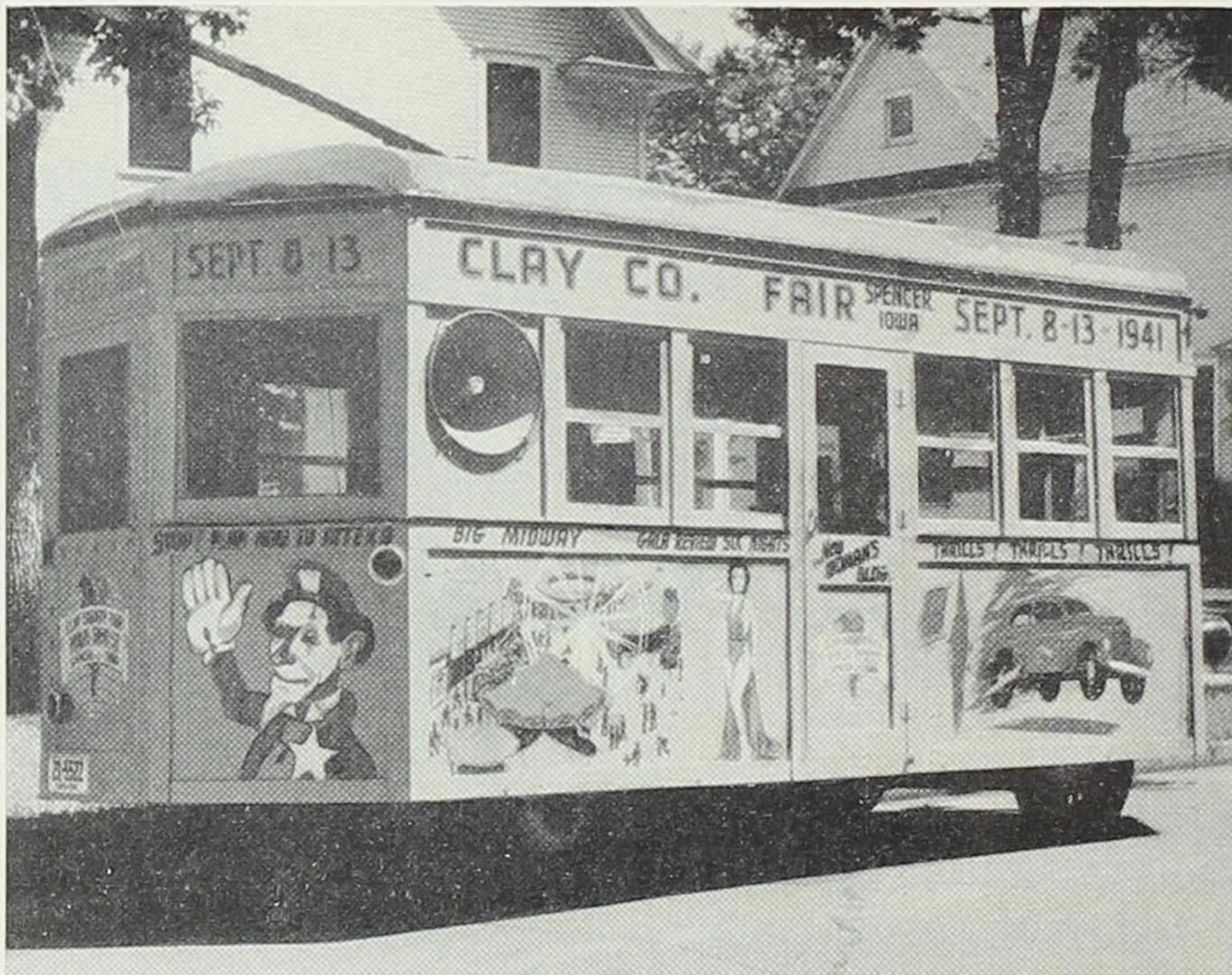
MARGARET POLLOCK



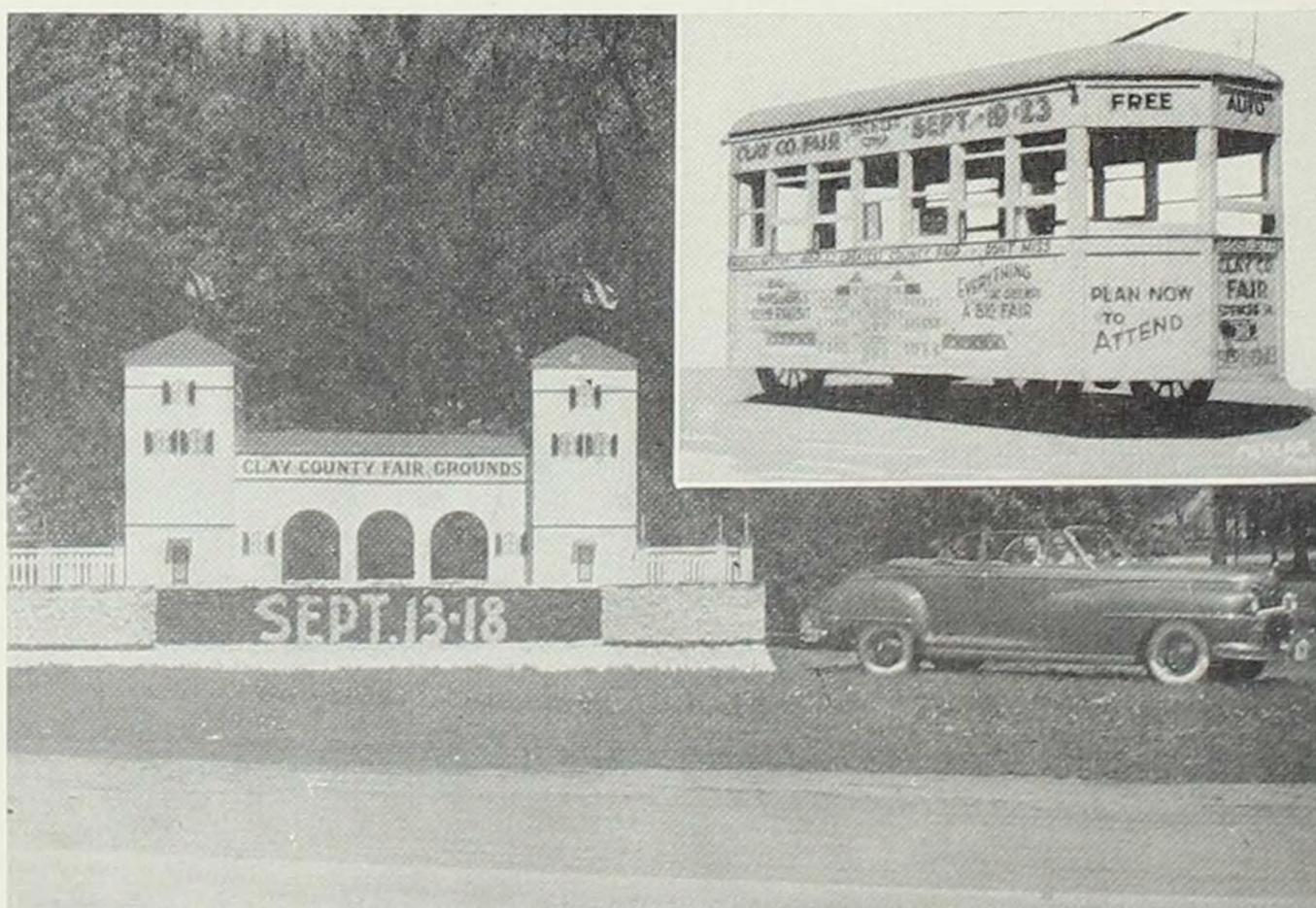
Diploma awarded in 1871 to Mrs. Jane Auringer for the best tomato and muskmelon sauces.



Farmers seeking aid from grasshopper plague in 1874 after third fair.



Old street car used for years to advertise Clay County Fair throughout northwest Iowa. Driven by E. Joy Roberts.



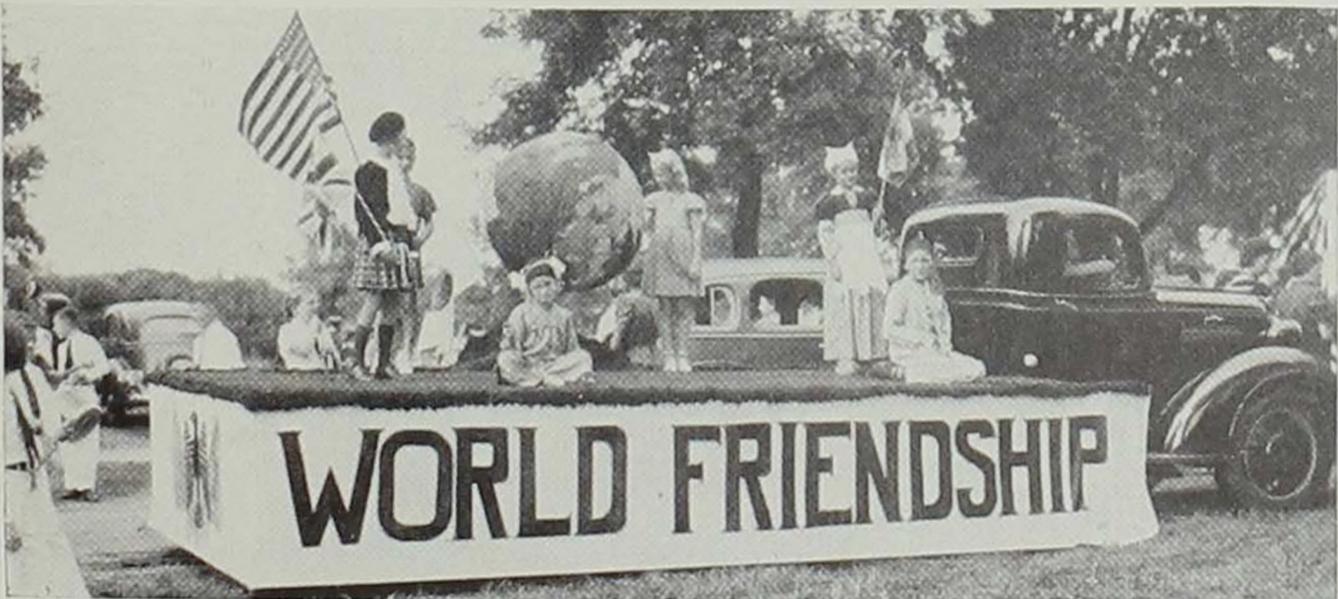
Replica of front gates taken to every large celebration within 150-mile radius of Spencer prior to 1948 fair. (Insert of street car.)



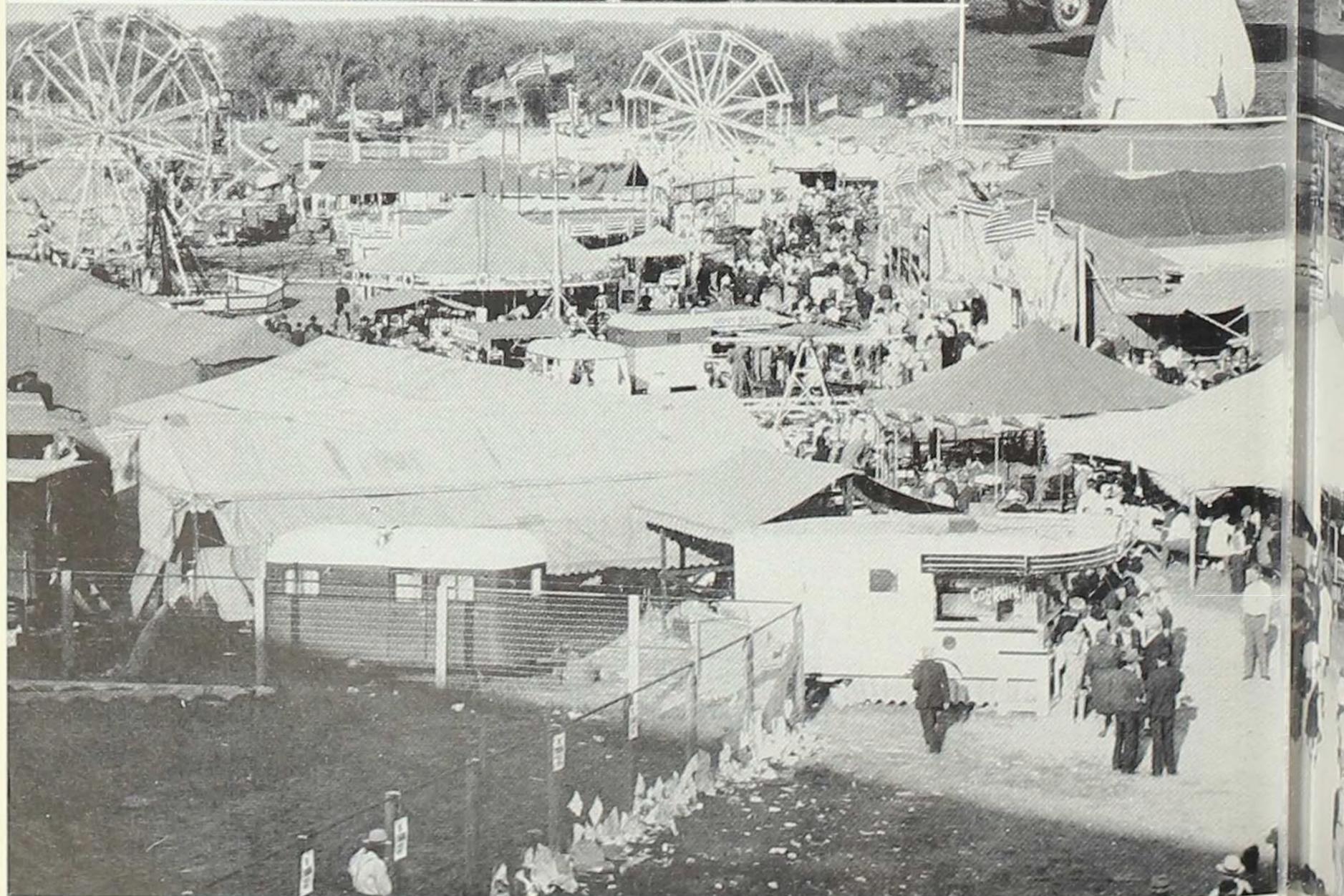
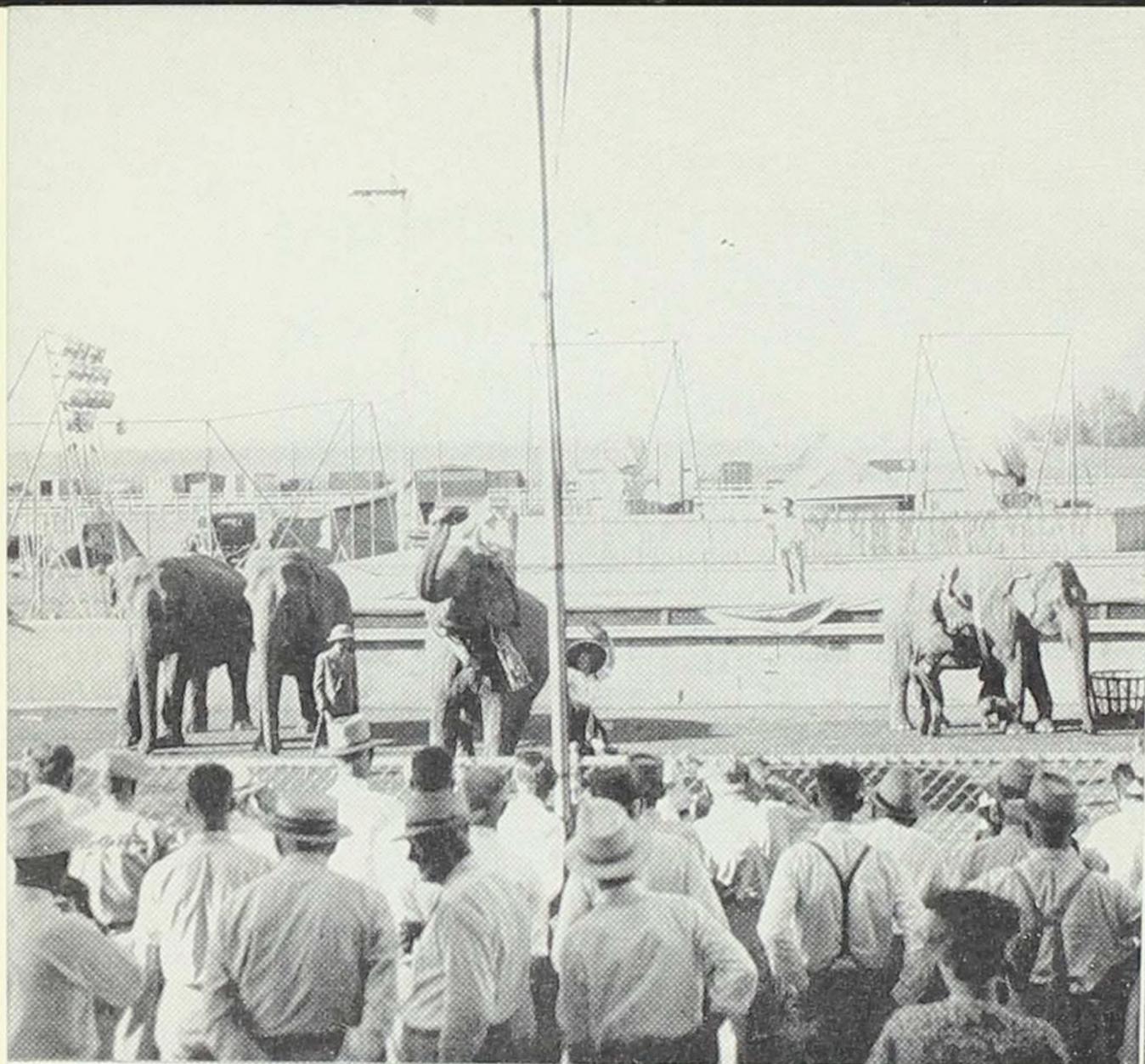
Royal, Iowa, School Float.



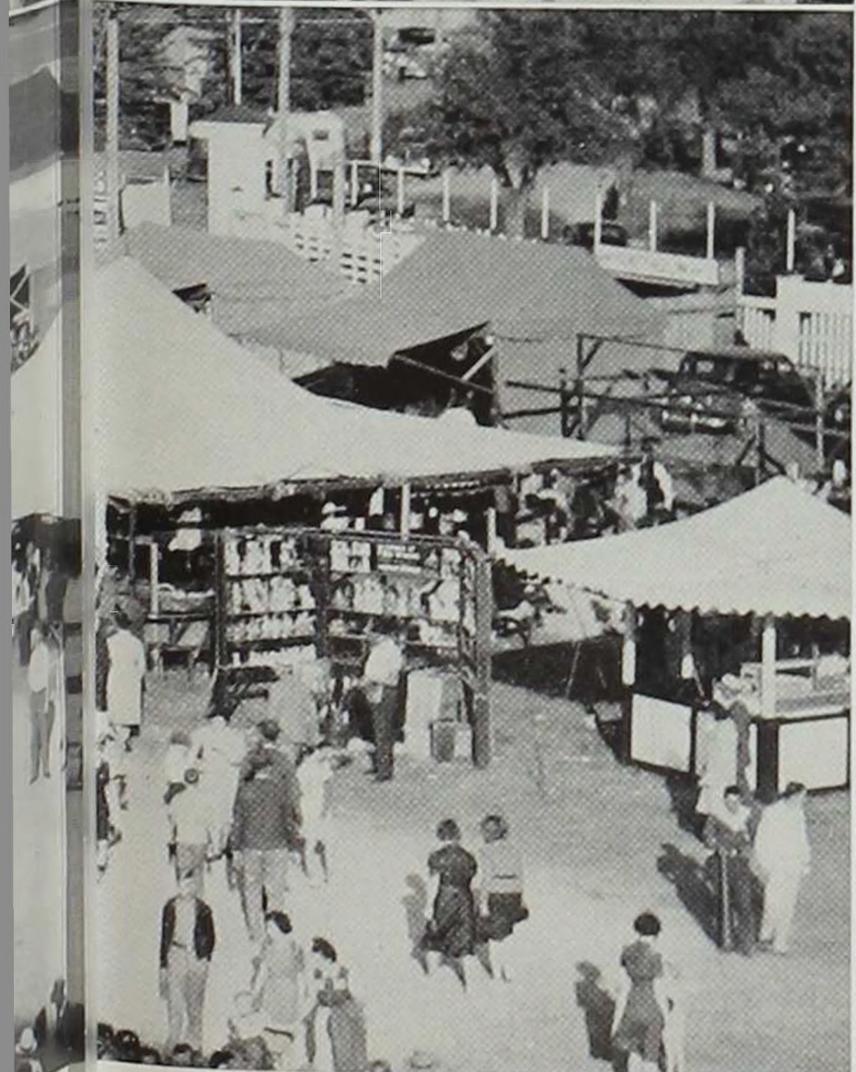
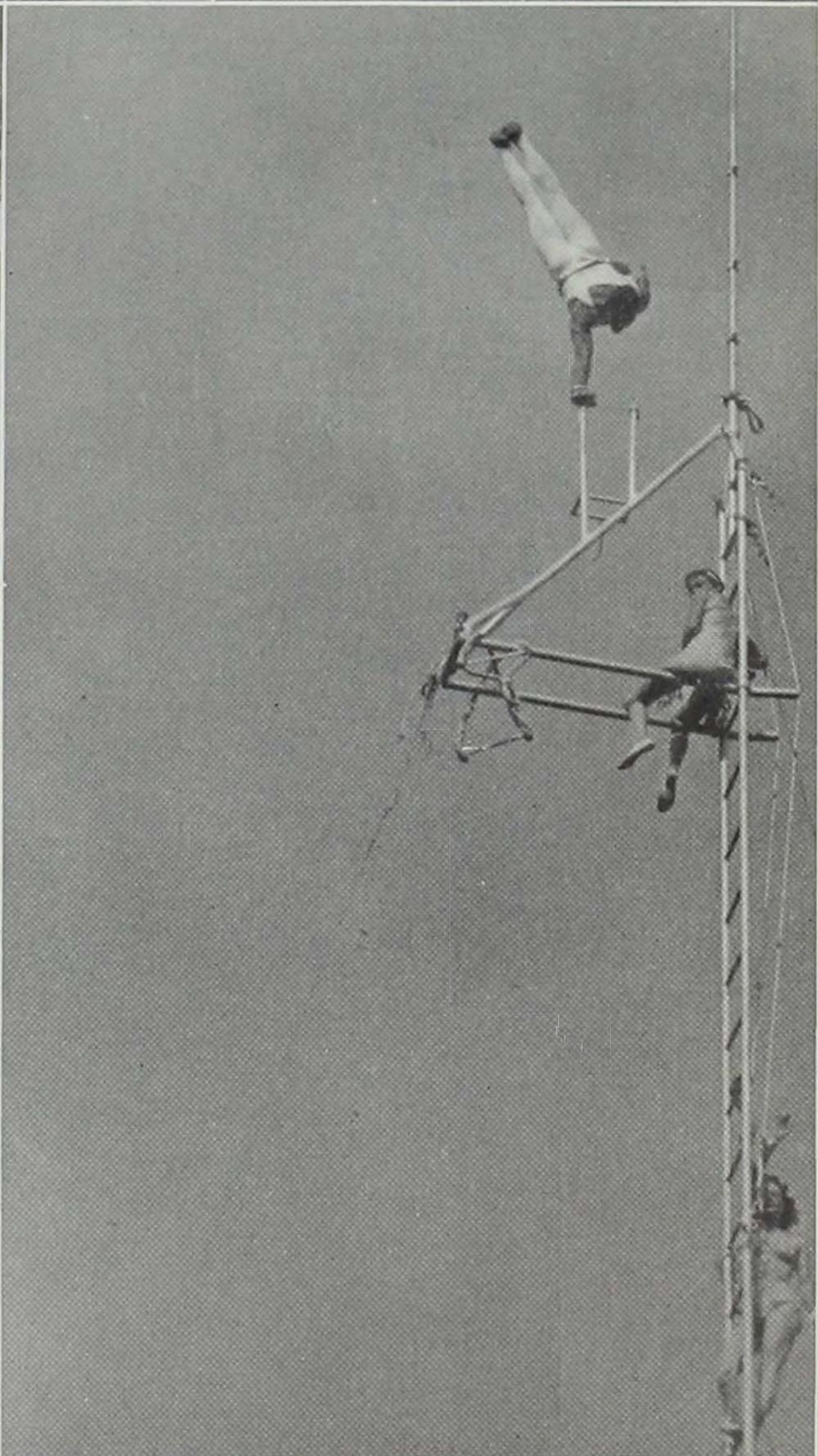
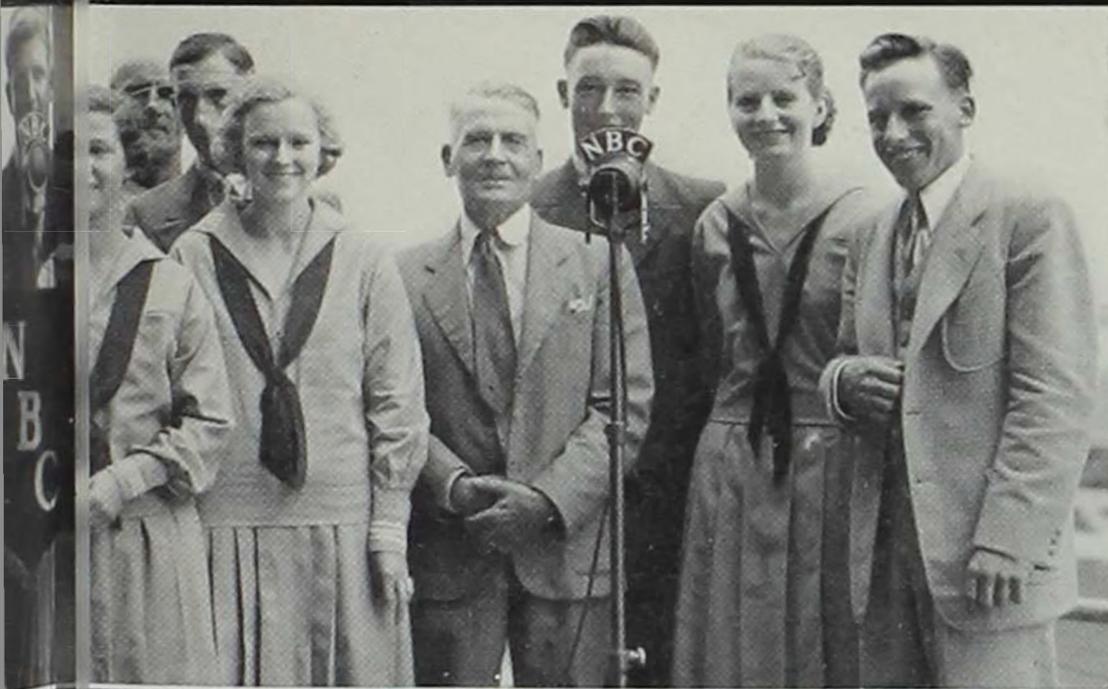
Avenue of Flags.



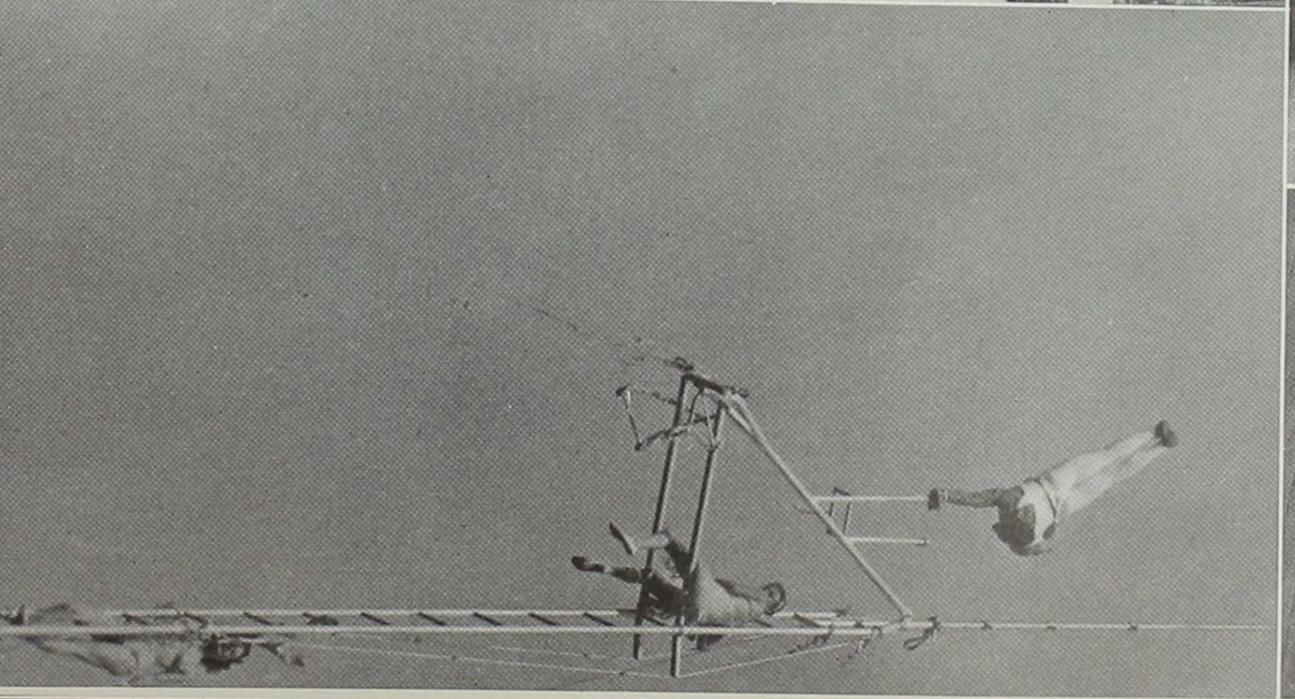
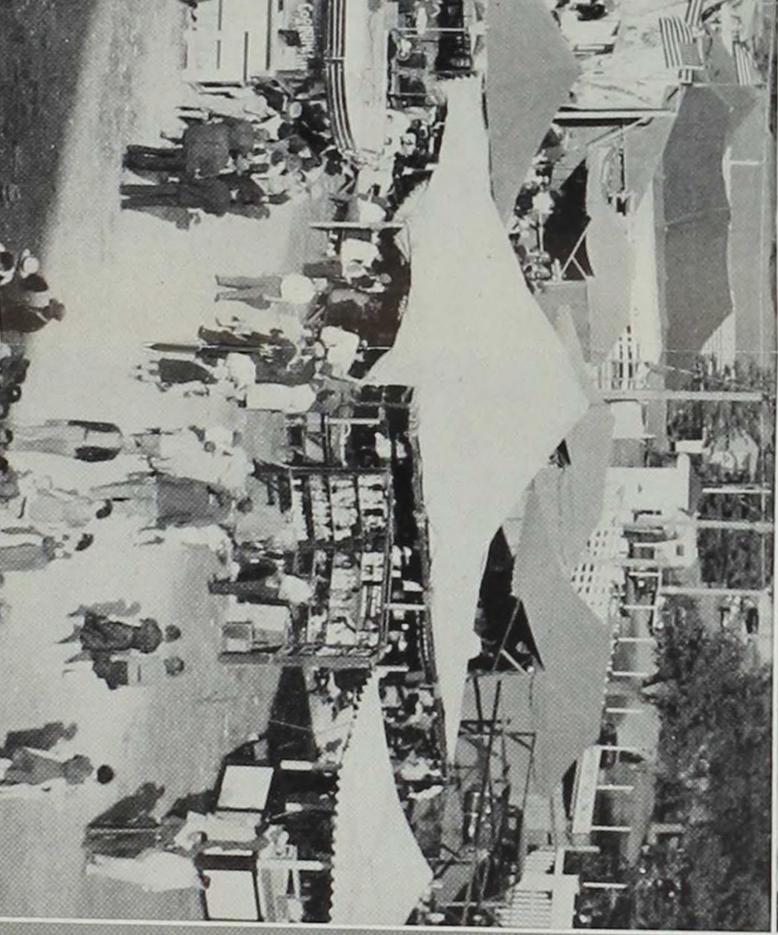
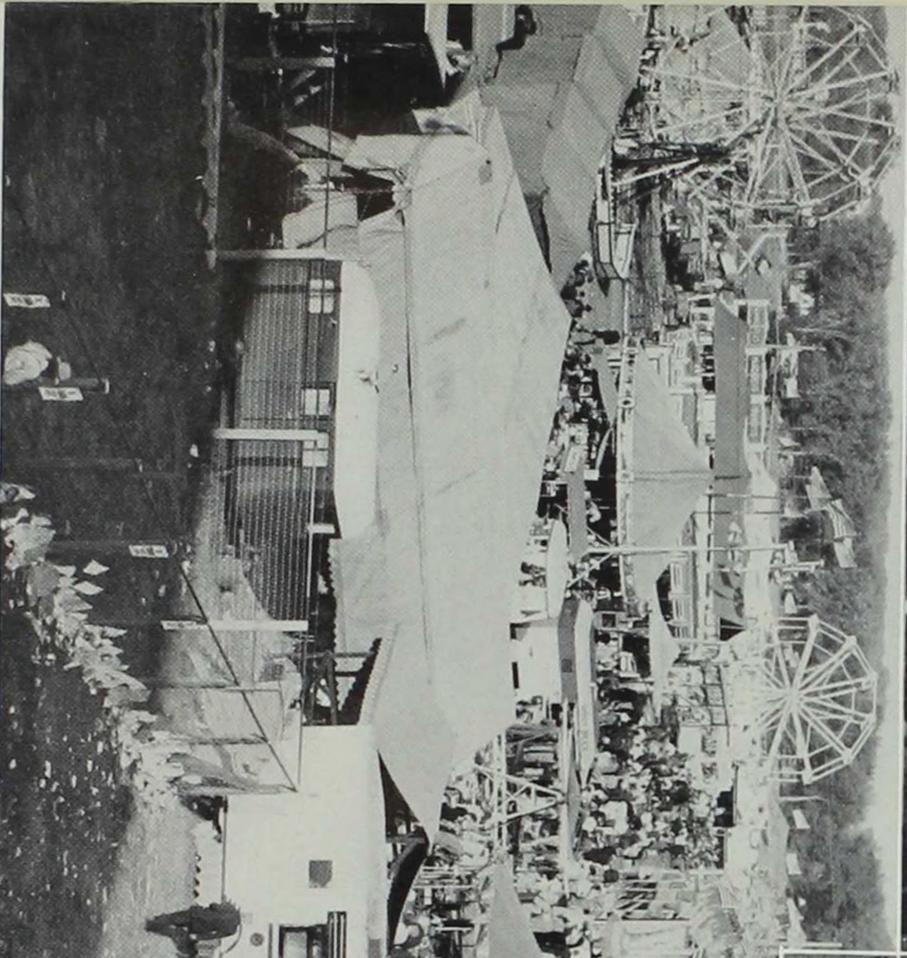
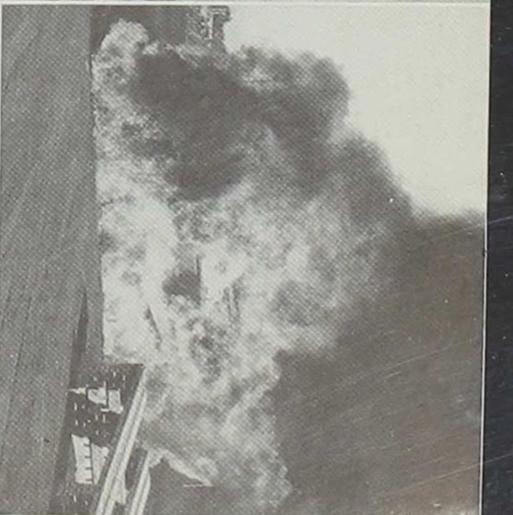
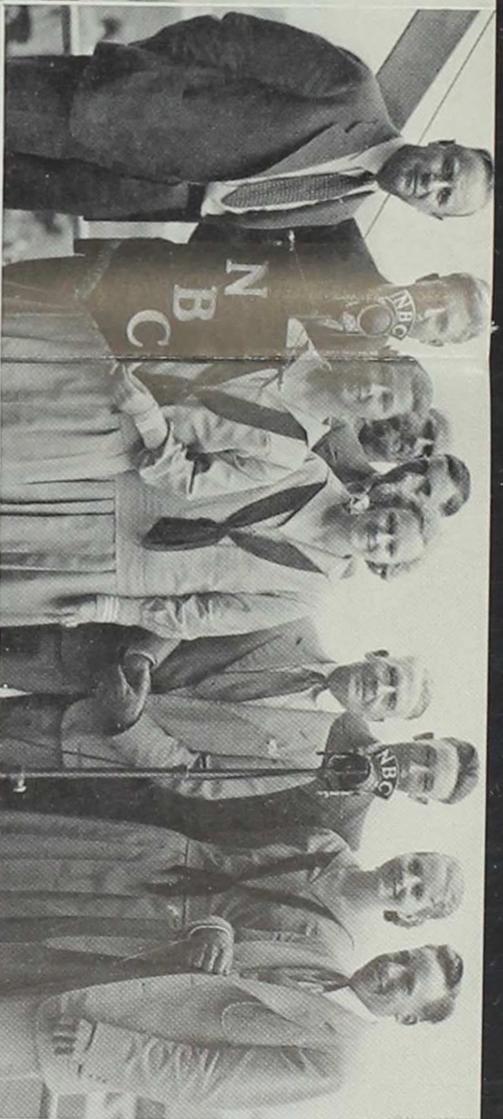
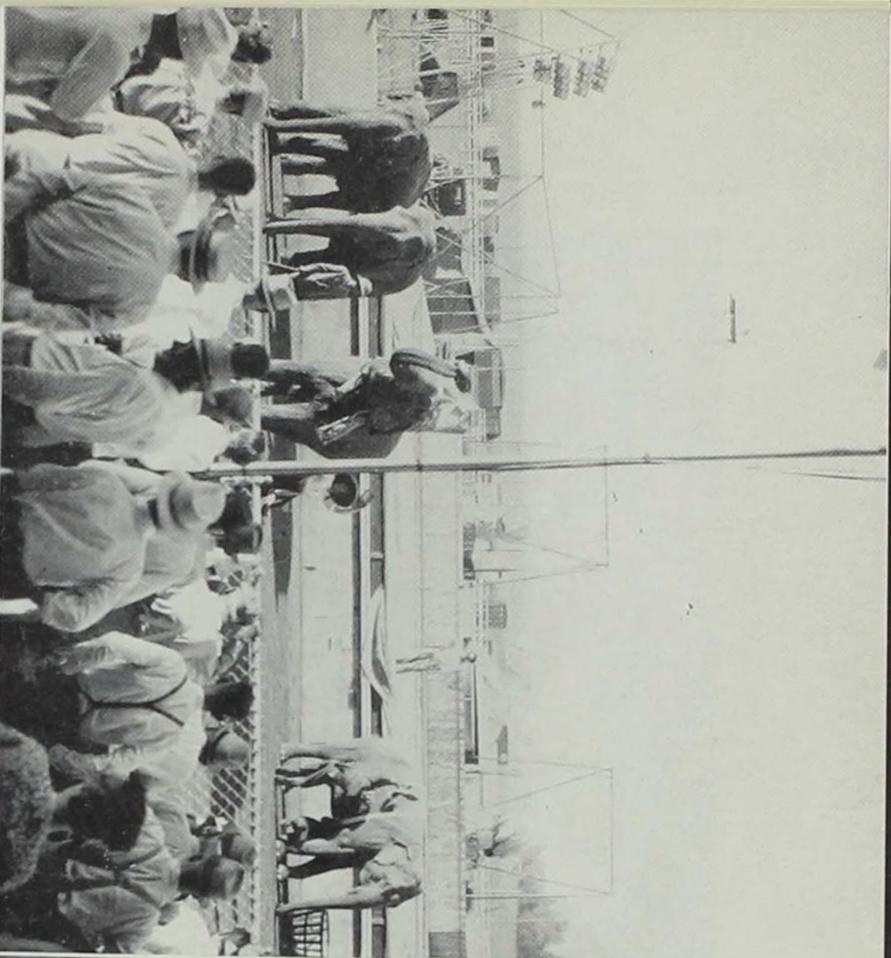
World Friendship School Float in 1938.



*Top (left to right):* Powers elephants entertain grandstand; Wm. E. Dripps and John B. Kennedy of NBC, 4-H girls Lois and Irene Madsen, H. Bruce Noll, Clarence Smith, Jr., Lucille Duncan, and Keith Burkhart at the 15-minute broadcast over NBC on September 13, 1936, advertising World's Greatest County Fair; Car driven up ramp and through wall of fire in 1941 Thrill Day.



Bottom (left to right): Midway northeast of grandstand in 1941; Auto hurdles through air over cars at 1941 Thrill Day; The Three Milos perform on their outdoor trapeze. Auto races, harness and running races, fireworks, and scores of novel and unusual entertainment acts bring thousands back to the fair every year.

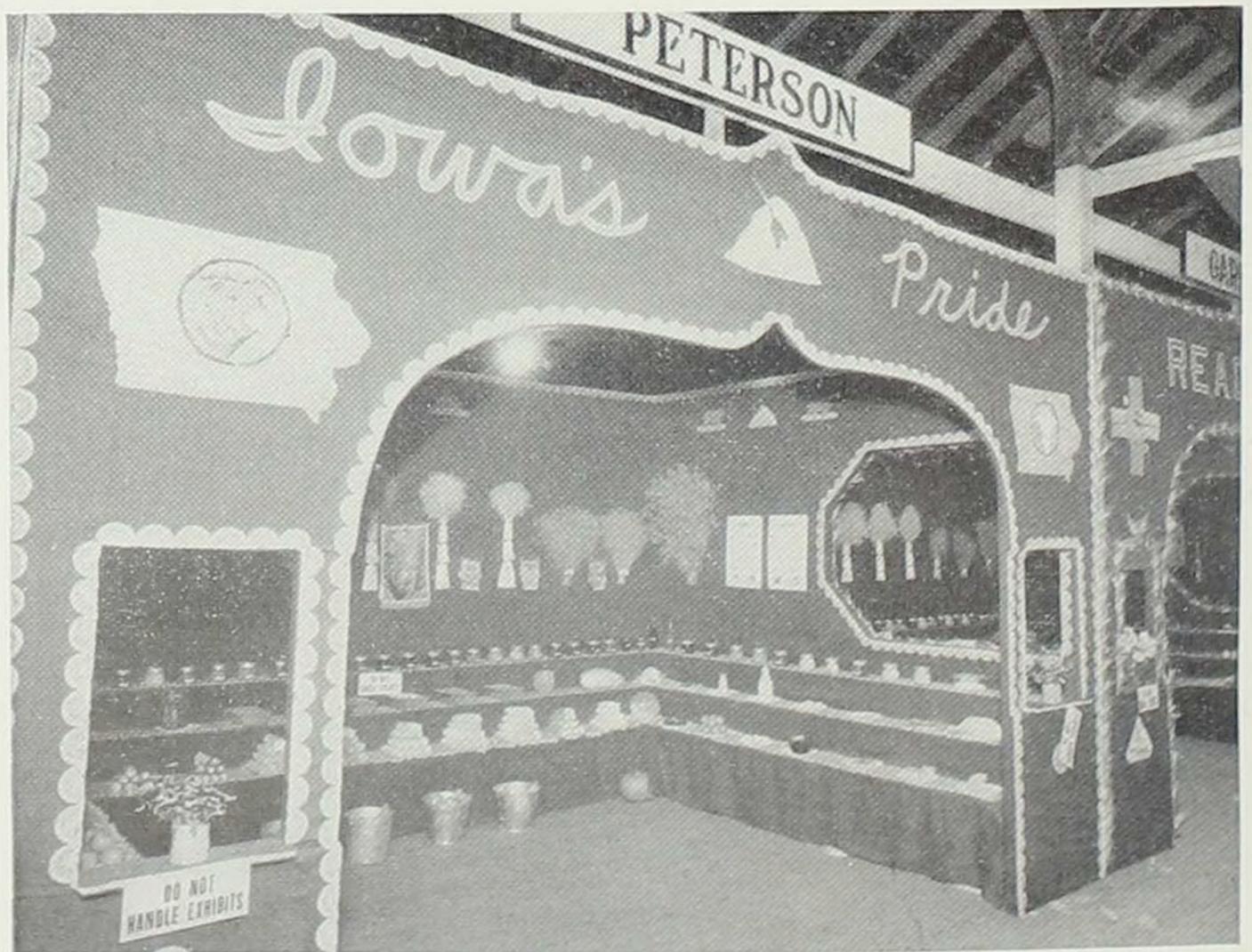


*Top (left to right):* Powers elephants entertain grandstand: Wm. E. Dripps and John B. Kennedy of NBC, 4-H girls Lois and Irene Madsen, H. Bruce Noll, Clarence Smith, Jr., Lucille Duncan, and Keith Burkhardt at the 15-minute broadcast over NBC on September 13, 1936, advertising World's Greatest Country Fair.

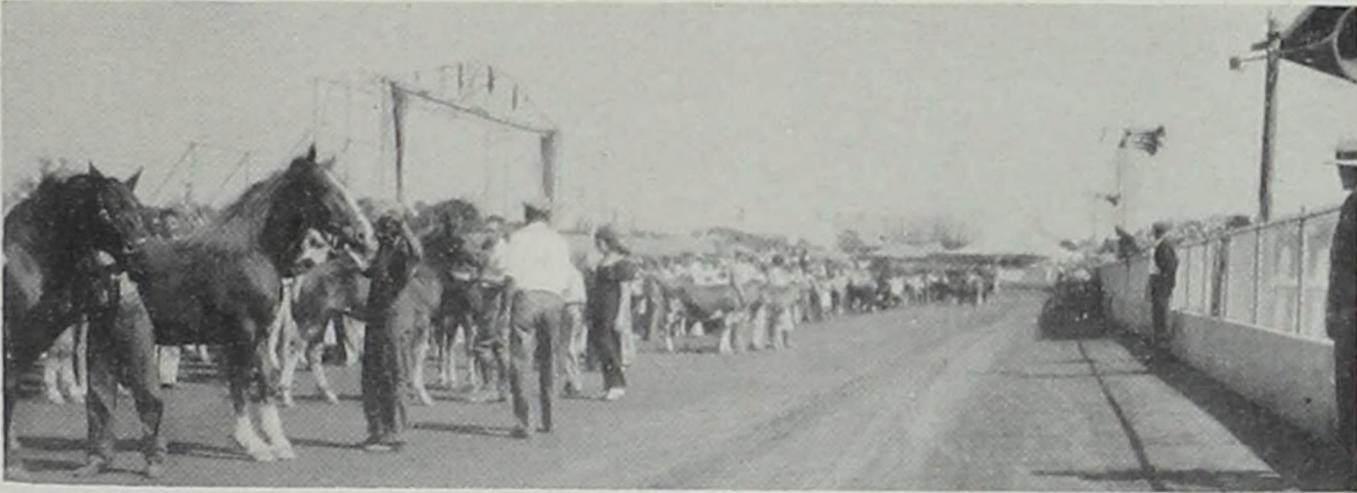
*Bottom (left to right):* Midway northeast of grandstand in 1941: Auto hurdles through air over cars at 1941 Thrill Day; The Three Milos perform on their outdoor trapeze. Auto races, harness and running races, fireworks, and scores of novel and unusual entertainment acts bring thousands back to the



Table Arrangements at Flower Show in 1948.



Peterson Township Booth — First Place Winner in 1949.



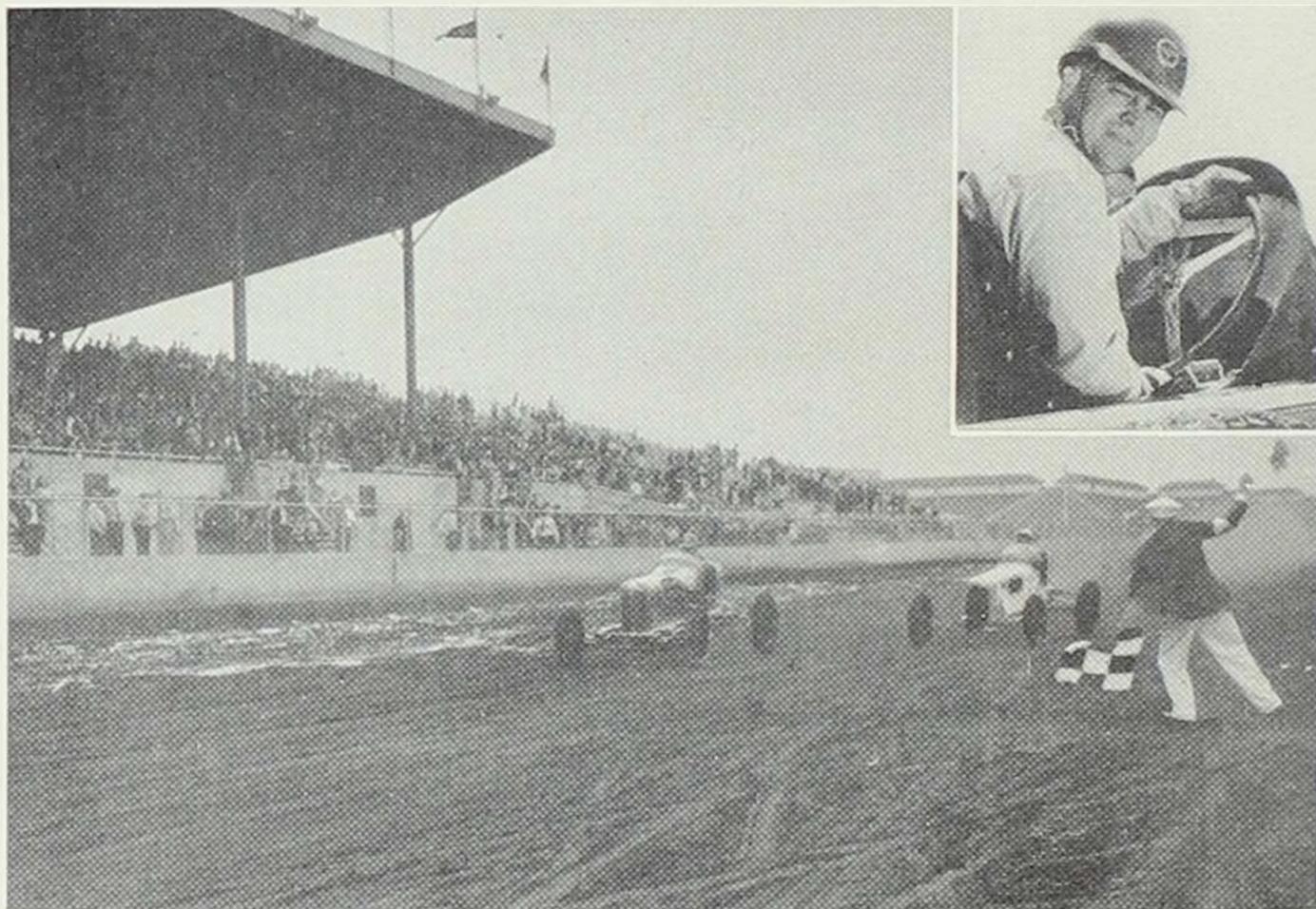
Million Dollar Livestock Parade.



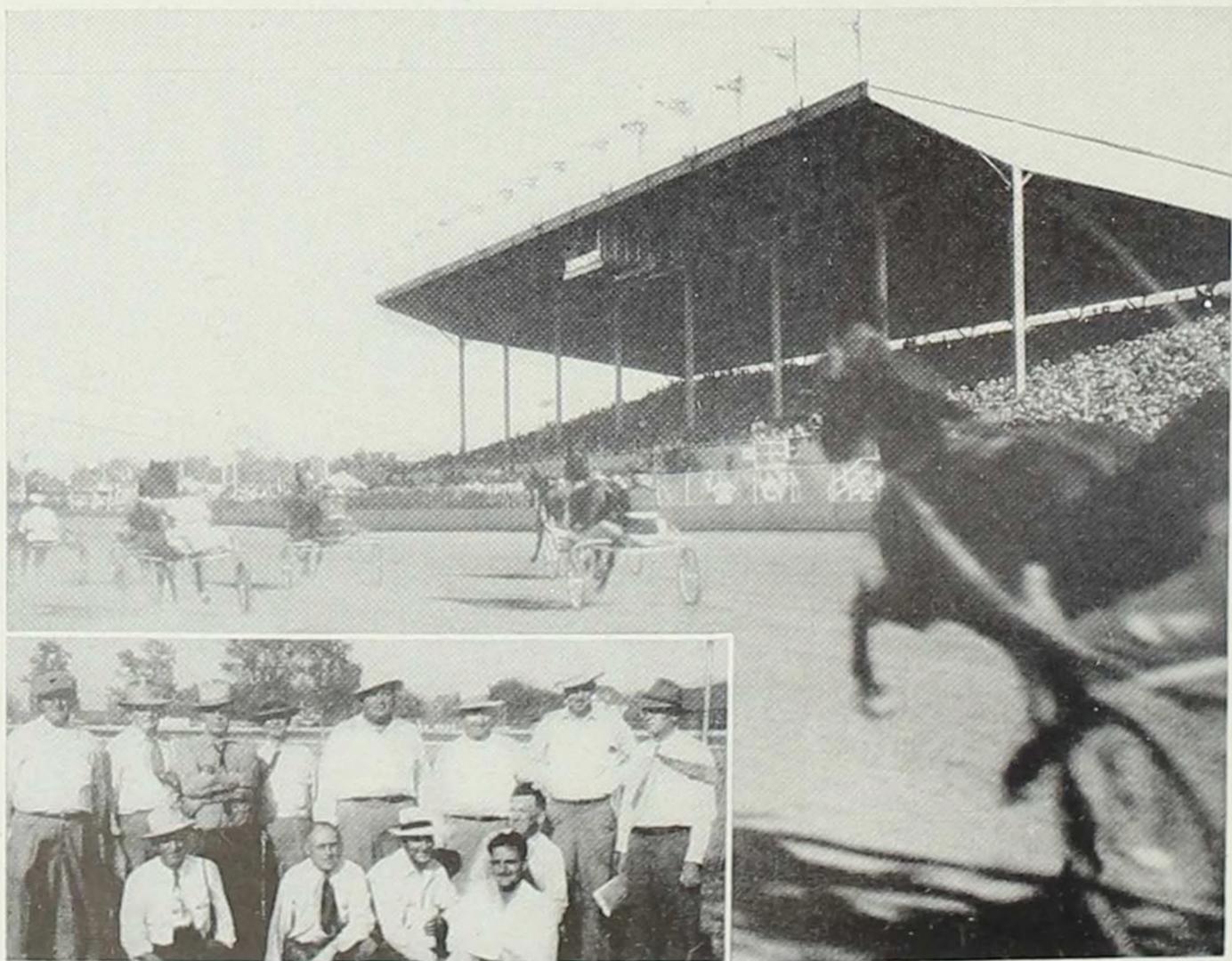
Joan Snyder of Linn Grove and Her District Grand Champion Hereford.



4-H Livestock Parade Before Grandstand in 1938.



Auto Racers on Half-Mile Dirt Track.  
*Insert:* Emory Collins of LeMars.



Harness Racers Speed Past Grandstand.  
*Insert:* Starters, Judges, and Timers.

## World's Greatest County Fair

Little did the founding fathers dream (as they discussed the inception of the modern Clay County Fair in Tuttle's Grove) that they were about to establish a gigantic institution that was to tax the combined efforts, energy, and ingenuity of the entire Spencer community. And yet, in 1920, in the third year of the fair, the press already was calling it "Iowa's Greatest County Fair." It was not until 1923, however, that this claim was officially printed on the premium book. The attendance of 45,000 for the four days in 1921 was exceeded only by the district fairs in Waterloo, Sioux City, Oskaloosa, and Davenport, all of which were week-long fairs, while Spencer's was only a four-day event.

That year the board of directors in Spencer issued a call for the public's united support, cooperation, effort, and loyalty in making the "Clay County Fair the best county fair in the middle west." When the statistics had been compiled, the local press shouted on October 4, 1923: "Best County Fair in the Middle West." The directors, however, went right on printing "Iowa's Greatest County Fair" on the premium books through the year 1928, although they claimed in 1924 that

"only one county fair in the United States excels us and that is an old established county fair in a thickly populated country."

Before the 1927 fair, the slogan "100,000 paid admissions in 1927" was adopted; but the weather was wet and cold and only 67,188 people came. A year later a fair edition confidently predicted, "As sure as you're a foot high there will be 100,000 people on the Clay County Fair Grounds this year."

Senator Charles Curtis of Kansas, Republican nominee for Vice President, who had already spoken at the New York State Fair, helped attain that 100,000 record by packing listeners into the grandstand. His address echoed around the entire country when he told a heckler, "You're too damn dumb to understand."

Only after a "madly enthusiastic crowd of 110,105 enjoyed the fair of 1928" did the Clay County Fair become "The World's Greatest County Fair." All official literature since that time has carried the slogan. In 1932, Leo Dailey, secretary, explained that the slogan was taken "when statistics proved the Clay County Fair to be the largest in the United States." He further stated that these statistics showed that the Clay County Fair was as large or larger than a third of the state fairs in the United States.

The days of the fair have always been specified as "special" days, set aside for nearby counties

and cities or for special activities. The initial day is Children's Day. In the early twenties, all school children of the county gathered that morning at the Spencer High School and paraded, under Superintendent J. R. McAnnelly's supervision, the sixteen blocks to the fairgrounds and in front of the grandstand with floats, banners, and bands. Every child in the parade was admitted free. Schools throughout the county were dismissed, as they are to this day, for Children's Day. Two thousand marched in the 1921 parade. By 1929, the parade route was shortened and started at North School. The floats, built on motor-driven vehicles, became very elaborate. In 1934, Gillett Grove won first place with a replica of their schoolhouse. In 1936, the school parade was a mile long. These parades are no longer held, although the children still are privileged guests that day, with special privileges in the grandstand and with all rides on the Midway costing only a nickel. School exhibits are still featured, but the children are no longer taken in a group to the livestock barns for "instructive lectures" on livestock and agriculture. No longer are sack races, potato races, and foot races held for the school children.

In the twenties, playgrounds were conducted for the smallest children and mothers were told that "they need not feel they must stay home during the fair because baby will get tired and fussy and will cry all day and spoil enjoyment, for a tent for

babies with special women in charge is provided."

In 1921, on Dickinson County Day, the Spirit Lake massacre was presented in fireworks. There was also a "Joy and Jazz Day" with a "Joy carnival and jazz music only at the concert." Caravans of sixty cars made booster trips out of Spencer to neighboring towns and celebrations to advertise that fair.

Later that fall by a vote of the stockholders, Dickinson County was to be given the opportunity of buying \$10,000 worth of fair stock in "Iowa's Greatest County Fair." Had the stock been sold, the fair was to have been named "Twin County Fair," but the project was never carried to completion. In November, the Clay County Board of Supervisors voted a half-mill levy for the county fair and reduced the bridge levy from five mills to four and a half, making the total taxes the same. The half mill was to bring in between \$4,700 and \$5,000.

The 1923 fair, in a full-page display, advertised:

Crank Up Your Six-Cylinder Air Cooled Ford and Head 'er for the Sixth Annual Clay County Fair. "Iowa's Biggest and Best County Fair." Harness and Running Races \$5,000 in Purses. Wonderful Agriculture, Livestock and Machinery Exhibits. \$10,000 in Premiums Offered. Band Concert Every Afternoon and Evening by Karl King's Band. Dazzling Display of Fireworks Nightly. Something Doin' Every Minute. Be Here and Help Do 'er. Positively No Confetti Before the Last Night.

That was the year the agricultural building was constructed at a cost of \$18,000. "The day preceding the fair, 300 farmers and their wives were there busy decorating and stocking the sixteen township booths, a jolly, happy go lucky group in friendly but serious competition — each doing his best to build the best township booth in the hall." The preceding year, Clay County had built and furnished the prize winning booth at the Iowa State Fair. People who had never been to the Clay County Fair crowded into the agricultural hall that year to see the booths which they had heard their neighbors describing.

The commercial clubs of Spencer, Milford, Arnolds Park, and Okoboji, aided by the Iowa Great Lakes Association, played hosts that year to 101 state officials, members of the Fortieth General Assembly, and other prominent residents of Iowa. They were met at the Tangney Hotel by State Representative J. A. King and Spencer School Superintendent J. R. McAnnelly and escorted to the grounds in a caravan of automobiles. The church women served them a picnic dinner at noon and they were guests at a banquet that night at the Masonic Temple. Clint and Bessie Robbins' concert orchestra from the fair played at the banquet. Lindsay Koons, of Karl King's band, sang. Floyd Foster, traveling salesman, overshadowed all addresses of visiting dignitaries and scored a never-to-be-forgotten hit with his Swed-

ish dialect address of welcome, impersonating "Ole Johnson" — a take-off on state officials, congressmen, and senators.

Visitors participated more in the races, in the horseshoe pitching contests, and in other competitive events during the first few years of the fair than they do now. In 1923, one of the free acts was a mule race with Walter H. Thomas winning on No Bananas, Dent E. Green second on Spark Plug, Blaine Asner third on That's What, and Omar Lighter fourth on All the Time.

The fair changed from a four-day to a five-day exposition in 1924 and continued as a five-day fair until 1935 when it became a six-day fair as it is today.

The extra day added in 1924 was for auto races. The preceding year (1923) eleven dealers had taken space for an auto show in a big tent by the entrance, in order to exhibit 1924 cars. In that first auto race, Ray Lampkin drove his Duesenberg a mile in :59.6 for a new state record. In 1927, an automobile show building was erected just west of the grandstand to display new models. The following year a "beautiful cyclone wall" of concrete and steel costing \$6,000 was built to protect spectators at the auto races. In 1930, it was said that "This year has seen the greatest improvement in automobiles since Henry started to build his Lizzie and you'll find them all in the spacious auto building. Anything from a 4 to 16 cyl-

inders, and equipped with everything except a back seat driver."

R. E. Buckell, secretary from 1924 through 1926, wrote that when he arrived in Spencer,

Everyone kept telling me about the greatness of the Clay County Fair and about the large crowds that attended. I thought in my own mind that Spencer and Clay County had the best bunch of boosters (or liars, I did not know which) that I had ever listened to.

I was not in Spencer very long before I was telling the same stories about the greatness of the fair, thinking I had better be a booster (or liar) along with the rest of the citizens of Clay County. I kept working getting everything in readiness for the 1924 fair and waiting to see if it would really be as large as I had been told it would be.

On Friday and Saturday before the fair opened exhibitors with their stock, race horse men with their horses and equipment and the concession men began to arrive. I was sure that on Saturday night everything was pretty much in place and there would not be much to do until Monday morning as the fair did not open until Tuesday morning. About five o'clock Sunday morning I was aroused by the telephone ringing and on answering I was informed that a trainload of livestock had just arrived from Sioux City, so I hustled out to the fair grounds to help find a place for all the livestock. On seeing all the stock arrive I thought that all the livestock in Iowa was going to be at the Great Clay County Fair.

At the 1924 Fair the boys' and girls' baby beeves and pigs were housed in tents, and no provision was made for housing the young exhibitors who had to sleep any place they could find. In 1925 tents, which were very unsatisfactory were provided for the boys but the girls still had to find a place to sleep. In 1926 a club building was

erected which we thought would be amply large for years to come but was soon found too small.

The county 4-H baby beef show was enlarged to a district show in 1928. That year the Spencer merchants had given the 4-H dairy clubs a splendid start in March and April by giving away twenty-four dairy calves to club boys and girls based on votes obtained from coupons issued on store purchases. Paul R. Busenbark, county agent, and Lester Gillette, formerly an instructor in dairy husbandry at Iowa State College, purchased the calves in Missouri. That was the year, too, that county men started spirited bidding for 4-H calves at the auction which closed the show. Stockmen, businessmen, and packers have made a continued practice of this. That year, the 108 baby beeves sold brought a total of \$17,275, an average per hundredweight price of \$17.30. Carl Schmid, 16, showed the first grand champion of the district show, a Hereford.

A Boys' and Girls' Club building, the "finest and only one of this kind on any county fair grounds in America," was constructed in 1929 at a cost of \$27,500. The show grew rapidly in size and stock barns were added as wings to this new building.

A new 4-H record was established in 1940 when a total of 435 baby beeves went on the auction block for \$49,058. The highest price ever paid then for a grand champion went to Arlan

Clausen: \$32.00 a hundredweight. By 1948, 426 baby beeves sold for \$162,239 and the grand champion shown by Kenneth Carlson brought \$38.17 a hundredweight.

Four-H pig competition became a district show in 1931. In 1948, the market pigs sold for a total of \$9,719 and the grand champion barrow owned by Teddy Mincer sold for \$216.00. A junior general livestock judging contest was a new feature in 1934 with the Calhoun County boys the winners, receiving the big traveling loving cup for the first time.

Hundreds of women annually attend the girls' demonstrations which were started in 1924 by the home economics clubs of the county. An addition was built on the agricultural hall in 1936 to house the 4-H girls' club contests.

The Million Dollar Livestock Parade of sleek, fat beef, prancing show horses, their heads held high and their bodies groomed to perfection, and perfectly proportioned sturdy draft horses was an annual spectacle for twenty years. The day prior to this parade, for which farmers from a hundred mile radius packed the grandstands, the 4-H boys and girls held their own livestock parade in front of the stands.

The fair, primarily an agricultural exposition, has always emphasized livestock and has always been crowded for more room. The notice in 1931 is typical: "3200 head of livestock is to be dis-

played and every available inch of display space has been reserved months in advance and many prospective exhibitors have been turned away." New champions came from Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri; herds that never before had made a county fair came to "The World's Greatest."

The fair used its six new big stock barns for the first time in 1937, when the horse show of both Percheron and Belgian draft horses was among the best in years. The barns for swine, sheep, and horses were grouped in a row south of the 4-H building and were erected at a cost of nearly \$40,000. Each barn was 36 feet wide and 300 feet long.

An annual favorite, "as necessary to the fair as the grandstand, as much a part of the fair as the entrance," is Karl King and his band. Whether playing for a Million Dollar Livestock Parade, for highwire artists, or a prelude to the afternoon or evening performance, his music is right. Known the world over as the "March King," Karl King left home as a youth to play under the big tops, with Sells-Floto and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Later he directed Barnum & Bailey's Circus Band. His ability, learned in the circus, to change his music tempo to fit the scheme of every hippodrome act and to provide perfect musical accompaniment for every big attraction, has made him irreplaceable at the fair. The fair tried a colored band in 1927, and Thavius' Band and his show of

"16 young women, talented, comely, shapely, elaborately costumed direct from Paris" in 1930 and '31, but was again "mighty happy to get King and his 22 piece band back" in 1933. He first came in 1922.

In 1923, two huge tents in the southeast corner of the grounds housed King's band. According to a press account: "The members not only stay in the tents overnight but have their own chefs and eating hours. Lack of rooms in most places where they play for fairs and celebrations led to this innovation and they no longer worry about rooms."

Housing and feeding of the huge crowds could easily have been a stumbling block for the Clay County Fair except for the wholehearted cooperation of the community. When the hotels are full, the clerks start sending folks to auxiliary rooms in homes over the town. For years, homes not only have rented out all available extra rooms to commercial exhibitors, entertainers, stockmen, and concessionaires, but have put up cots and emergency beds on porches and in little used rooms, sometimes making extra rooms with temporary partitions of sheets and blankets. Many residents "entertain" the same "guests" year after year and have become good friends.

As the fair grew out of earlier county-wide picnics and barbecues, visitors at the first fair were invited to bring family picnic baskets and eat un-

der the trees. Gradually the church ladies set up denominational stands. Their food was excellent and business flooded in on them. Day after day ladies arose before dawn to make pies, peel potatoes, snap beans, and put their meats on to cook. The stands were the best money makers of the church year. As fair attendance mounted, the task became too big for the ladies, and gradually commercial firms and some fraternal organizations took over the work of feeding the thousands of fair visitors.

It was said that "President Wilson had his Colonel House, and the Clay County Fair its E. Joy Roberts." Roberts is the continuous thread woven through the Clay County Fair project from the beginning until his death from a heart attack in 1948. He was the man with many jobs who worked in close association with every secretary. In 1921, Roberts sold \$1,400 worth of advanced season tickets at \$1.90 apiece. He distributed advertising all over northern Iowa, obtained entries, looked after official and privileged cars, saw that the horse race men were taken care of, and did about everything. In an advertising car, built as a replica of a trolley, he distributed store window cards, fence signs, bumper signs, and newspaper advertising to all areas within a radius of 100 miles. The "trolley" was equipped with a dual speaker sound system, and the outside of the "buggy" was brightly painted with fair advertis-

ing. Roberts would cover 5,000 miles in a season with the trolley hitting every major gathering in the area. It was always said during fair week, "If you can't find the secretary, ask Roberts." Leo Dailey, fifth secretary of the fair, recalls Roberts "heart and soul in the fair and always in evidence, arguing or talking, but always on the spot when needed." Dailey — newspaperman, violinist, and veteran of World War I — served the fair as its secretary from 1927 through 1937 and saw it grow from an attendance of 67,188 in 1927 to 135,490 in 1937.

The Cardiff Giant, the fireworks display of Lindbergh's flight to Paris, and the old settlers' gathering headed by A. W. Chamberlain and Charles S. Weaver were features of Dailey's first fair. Then came the six-horse exhibition team from the Chicago Union Stockyards, the Winter Garden Revue with its latest hits from Broadway, Cato's Famous Vagabonds and their music for afternoon and evening dancing on the mirror-like surface of the new outdoor dance floor, followed later by Tracy-Brown's Columbia Recording Orchestra. The dance floor was enclosed and made into a large and permanent pavilion in 1934. Two years later, in 1936, Costica Florescu smiled "in the face of death performing on a 110 foot pole, new record for altitude in acrobatic feats."

The Royal American Shows, a thirty freight car carnival, a gloriously illuminated avenue of

fun, came first in 1930 and became favorites for the next half decade. Nightly the eerie fingers of the carnival's four giant searchlights played across the sky and could be seen for miles. The fairgrounds were expanded to 58 acres in 1934, when additional land was taken northeast of the grandstand for Midway purposes. Fourteen acres of parking space already had been added in 1932.

The \$45,000 steel and concrete grandstand with a seating capacity of 5,000 was built the year of the great fire, 1931, when a big portion of Spencer's business district was leveled by fire started when a youngster accidentally dropped lighted punk into a display window of fireworks. With a \$700,000 rebuilding program underway and new buildings rising on the ashes of that conflagration of June 27, the businessmen still loaned money for the erection of the grandstand. The rear of the grandstand was enclosed three years later for exhibit purposes. The new grandstand was placed on the site of the old, and the old cut in two and used for nearby auxiliary seats. The grandstand seating capacity was increased to nearly 9,000 in 1936 with the erection of 3,330 concrete and steel bleacher seats.

Filling those seats to capacity day after day and drawing huge crowds into the grounds has always partially been credited to the special fair editions issued by the two Spencer newspapers about a week in advance of each fair, and to the

publicity given by surrounding and other state papers. Each year, 100 or more editors and their wives from northern Iowa and southern Minnesota are guests of the fair on Editors' Day.

In early days, before there were night shows, the editors were entertained at an evening banquet. To these came such noted guest speakers as Ed Howe, the potato patch editor from Kansas, and Richard Henry Little, who edited the column "Line O Type" in the *Chicago Tribune*. Howe attended in 1924 and Little in 1925 at the invitation of E. L. C. White and E. S. Randall, local publishers, who founded Editors' Day. White's special fair edition of the *Spencer News-Herald* was awarded second place for the most outstanding edition, and honorable mention for general excellence by the National Editorial Association at St. Louis in 1934. Two years later his edition was judged the best special edition in Iowa.

Radio came along to add its backing to the fair. The fair workers were delighted when the National Broadcasting Company sent two men to Spencer in 1936 to describe the fair over 65 stations of the Blue network. The broadcast was made at noon in front of the grandstand and taking part were Fair President H. Bruce Noll; Lois Madsen, 4-H girl whose record book won her a trip to Washington, D. C.; Lucille Duncan, another 4-H girl whose wool suit project had placed

second at the State Fair; Flavious Dodge, a 4-H livestock winner; Roy Pullen of the fair board; Irene Madsen, who with her sister Lois, had composed a winning demonstration team at the State Fair.

The booth workers' banquet, given after the fair each year to the farm folk who took part in the Herculean job and intricate work of building township booths out of sheaves and kernels of grain, vegetables, and fruits, serves a double purpose. It rewarded these people with a dinner and evening of fun provided by professional entertainers brought in for that purpose, and served as a town hall for suggestions of ways in which the fair could be improved. These banquets were cancelled during the depression, but were revived by public clamor, and again cancelled during meat rationing of World War II. The banquets, attended by a few hundred to a thousand farmers, were held in the dance hall, and later under the enclosed bleachers. Row after row of tables and chairs were set up. Guests brought their own dishes and silver. Food was cooked in town and taken to the fairgrounds in great tubs. Dr. C. E. Golly, dentist and later mayor of Spencer, was chief cook, heading an army of assistant cooks and waitresses.

"Everyone works on the fair" is more truth than fiction. No one knows when a big job is going to be handed to him. Robert H. Miller, who had

been an auto-hopper since 1919, moved away from Spencer, and then returned in August, 1930, and thought he would take some part in the sale of tickets again. But, as he reminisces, "Sunday afternoon (and the fair opened on Tuesday) the Fair Board advised me that I was to take over the Concessions. In view of the fact that I knew considerably less of the Concession Business than I may have guessed as to the weight of a load of loose hay, I offered my objections, as it seemed a tough assignment. Objections overruled by the Fair Board." Miller served the fair board in this capacity for thirteen successive fairs. His was the job of finding and assigning space to the commercial exhibitors, and the refreshment and novelty proprietors who wanted space; in 1941 there were 150 concessionaires.

Ione Matheson (now Mrs. Clinton Woodward) took a position as secretary to the secretary and served with Leo Dailey. Her efficiency and responsibility led to the position of assistant secretary. Dailey recalls that Ione was "always pleasant and completely competent to handle so many of the little things that drive a manager nuts." She served with several succeeding secretaries in a full or part-time position.

As the years came and the years went, new features were added and others dropped away. Two 36 foot stands covered with tarpaulins were erected in 1929 and nearly 4,000 blankets and

shawls, more than a carload, were put out by the Glen Pedersen American Legion Post No. 1.

Reub Liebmann, the beloved clown, rube of all rubes, came first in 1919 and was still doubling people up with laughter in the early forties. J. B. McCord, the itinerant artist and sculptor, in 1933 and 1934, reproduced "The Last Supper" in mud for a few coins tossed to him by the watching crowd. Robert Wadlow, 18, of Alton, Illinois, the tallest man in the world, 8 feet 7 inches, astounded the crowds in 1937. The medicine man, year after year, has blocked traffic.

Jack Mack, nationally-known stunt driver, handcuffed to the steering wheel of a stock model sedan, in 1930 made a 100 hour endurance drive completing it in front of the grandstand. The Des Moines *Register's* autogiro or "windmill plane" hovered "like a great eagle above the buildings and marveling crowds" in 1931. Bobby Jones, the "Rocket Girl," was shot from the fiery mouth of a cannon and hurled 60 feet in the air in 1937. Glen Sohn, "the bat man, flew thousands of feet above the earth" in 1935. The "Wonder Bread Blimp" came after World War II. George Waltz, daredevil flyer, held crowds breathless in 1948 and 1948 when he was strapped on the top wing of a plane and flown upside down.

During J. Howard Peterson's first year as secretary, in 1938, the Hopi Indians, ancient tribe of American aborigines, performed their weird and

eerie pagan snake dance, a prayer for rain in the desert. Six inches of rain fell, and men and women waded barefoot through mud and water.

Peterson was instrumental in bringing the Power's elephants, Lena, Jennie, Roxy, and Julie, an aggregate weight of twelve tons, to the fair. He had seen them as a World War I sailor in the New York Hippodrome and was delighted when he knew they were available for the Clay County Fair. Thrill day with cars hurtling through the air, crashing into brick walls, and being jumped through screens of fire was begun in 1941.

A five-year series of public weddings begun in 1932 attracted great crowds and wide publicity. Marjorie D. L. Smith and Gunnar A. Osterling, both of Cleghorn, were married in a double ring ceremony in an elaborate stage setting at the first wedding. The bride in white satin with a long train was surrounded by a bevy of beautifully gowned bridesmaids, flower girls, and a gay troupe of honored friends. These ceremonies were replaced in 1939 with the crowning of a fair queen. Althea Stuhr of Everly was first queen.

Flags of twenty nations floated along the street from the main entrance far back to the Boys' and Girls' Club building for the first time in 1935 and was proclaimed "The Avenue of Flags." It was such colorful features that helped swell attendance by 1941 to a record-breaking 172,234.

MARGARET POLLOCK

## The Fair Today

The outbreak of World War II, the exodus of the young men, meat rationing, gasoline tickets, and the all-out effort to win the war caused officials to cancel the Clay County Fair from 1942 through 1945. At the close of the war some doubted if it could be revived, or at least brought up to its former greatness. Fortunately, most folks were optimistic.

When William J. Knipe was appointed secretary he faced the gigantic task of reconditioning the grounds. During the war the buildings had been leased out for such purposes as warehouse storage, raising turkeys and hogs, and for a pre-glider training school. The buildings were run down, many partitions torn out, and permanent displays lost or damaged. Both buildings and grounds needed complete renovation. Days and nights were spent figuring how to get the plant back into operation. With no income for four years, the bank account was about gone and money had to be borrowed to get started again. Officials wondered if the people had forgotten the fair spirit. Help was hard to get.

About that time, Leon W. Witter, banker, was elected president. Knipe went over to the bank

for a conference and recalls being told, "Bill, if you have grit enough to tackle the job, so have I. We will learn the Fair business together." And learn it they did, Knipe recalls:

We cleaned, painted, scrubbed and hammered and it was all set to open two weeks ahead of opening day. Came opening day and I was up at four a. m. scanning the sky and wondering if the fair was really going to click. About four hours later the cars were rolling in and at ten o'clock I could see cars lined up from the North Y [a distance of two miles] to our gates. We soared to a new attendance record that week [199,673] and I knew that the great spirit of the Clay County Fair had not grown weaker but had broken out in new splendor and strength.

The fair has grown steadily in attendance through its twenty-eight expositions as shown by the following attendance figures:

1918	28,000	1929	110,652	1940	154,680
1919	48,000	1930	130,599	1941	172,234
1920	42,000	1931	83,501	1942	No fair
1921	45,000	1932	89,854	1943	No fair
1922	57,000	1933	114,632	1944	No fair
1923	70,000	1934	124,411	1945	No fair
1924	75,860	1935	152,187	1946	199,673
1925	70,021	1936	141,734	1947	205,688
1926	73,803	1937	135,490	1948	185,000
1927	67,188	1938	139,970	1949	177,000
1928	110,105	1939	155,215	Total	<u>3,159,497</u>

It takes a lot of people from a widespread area to attract such crowds. In 1939, Secretary Peterson had a count made of cars parked in the free

parking lot during fair week. There were 1,690 out-of-state cars from 21 states, besides 11,487 cars from 88 of the 99 counties in Iowa. Many folks, it must be remembered, parked their cars outside the fair grounds.

Sally Rand and her ostrich plumes came in 1947. Joan Snyder, 16-year-old 4-H girl from Douglas township, did something no one else has ever done: her Hereford baby beef was declared district grand champion of the 4-H show, her Angus was awarded the district reserve championship, and her Shorthorn was champion of Shorthorns. Ben Nelson was fair secretary that year.

W. P. (Bill) Woods took over the job of secretary in preparation for the 1948 fair. That was the year that President Witter and his board built a veritable village of new buildings in the west part of the fairgrounds, extending the Avenue of Flags on westward. The fair had grown and no construction had been done for years because of the war and the shortage of materials. Constructed in 1948 were: an open livestock cattle barn, a large 4-H judging ring with bleachers, a 4-H pig barn, a 4-H dairy heifer barn, and a National Guard building. Some of these buildings are cement block, others are single or multiple quonsets, and all have red brick fronts. With the 4-H moved into several new buildings, the old Boys' and Girls' building was extensively remodeled for commercial exhibits.

The Methodist building was remodeled and turned over as an exclusive site for the flower show. In two years' time, the Clay County Garden Club, headed by Mrs. A. E. Anderson, has built this show to high recognition among floriculturists of the state.

Flying Farmers' Day has been established as an annual event with a special landing field to the north at the Roy Pullen farm adjacent to the fairgrounds. In 1948 a total of 43 flying farmers flew in with 60 passengers for the fair.

In 1948, Belva Lou Ross won the Clay County Fair title of Style Queen for a wool suit she had tailored and accessories she selected and modeled. She went on to win state honors, and then to the National 4-H Congress in Chicago to become a national Style Queen.

Lisa Larsen, *Life* photographer, spent the entire 1949 fair week on the grounds and on farms of 4-H club members. Subsequently nine pages of 4-H activity at the fair appeared in that national magazine.

The Clay County Fair will have three days of harness races again in 1950, according to J. W. Cory, Jr., speed superintendent of both the Clay County Fair and the Iowa State Fair. Although the State Fair and some other fairs are dropping them, there has been no slackening of attendance at the harness races at Spencer.

Some idea of the comparative size of the Clay

County Fair may be gained from the following figures compiled by the Iowa State Fair Board.

Average Yearly Attendance  
1946-49

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Paid</i>
Iowa State Fair <i>(Des Moines, 10 days)</i>		490,000
Dairy Cattle Congress <i>(Waterloo, 8 days)</i>	227,000	187,200
Clay County Fair <i>(Spencer, 6 days)</i>	191,000	119,750
All Iowa Fair <i>(Cedar Rapids, 6 days)</i>	110,000	59,750
Mississippi Valley Fair <i>(Davenport, 6 days)</i>	65,700	51,000
North Iowa Fair <i>(Mason City, 5 days)</i>	65,700	44,750

President Witter, Secretary Woods, and fair board members, J. A. King, Robert Keir, Harry Lawrence, R. S. LaBrant, John F. Schoelerman, A. E. Anderson, Earl Bassett, Burt Rossiter, and carnival superintendent John Greer were in Chicago in January of 1950 to buy the night show and hippodrome acts, the carnival, and the speed and thrill day attractions. Come Monday, September 11, 1950, all will be in readiness for the twenty-ninth annual exposition as crowds start pouring through the gates to see the WORLD'S GREATEST COUNTY FAIR.

MARGARET POLLOCK

