

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