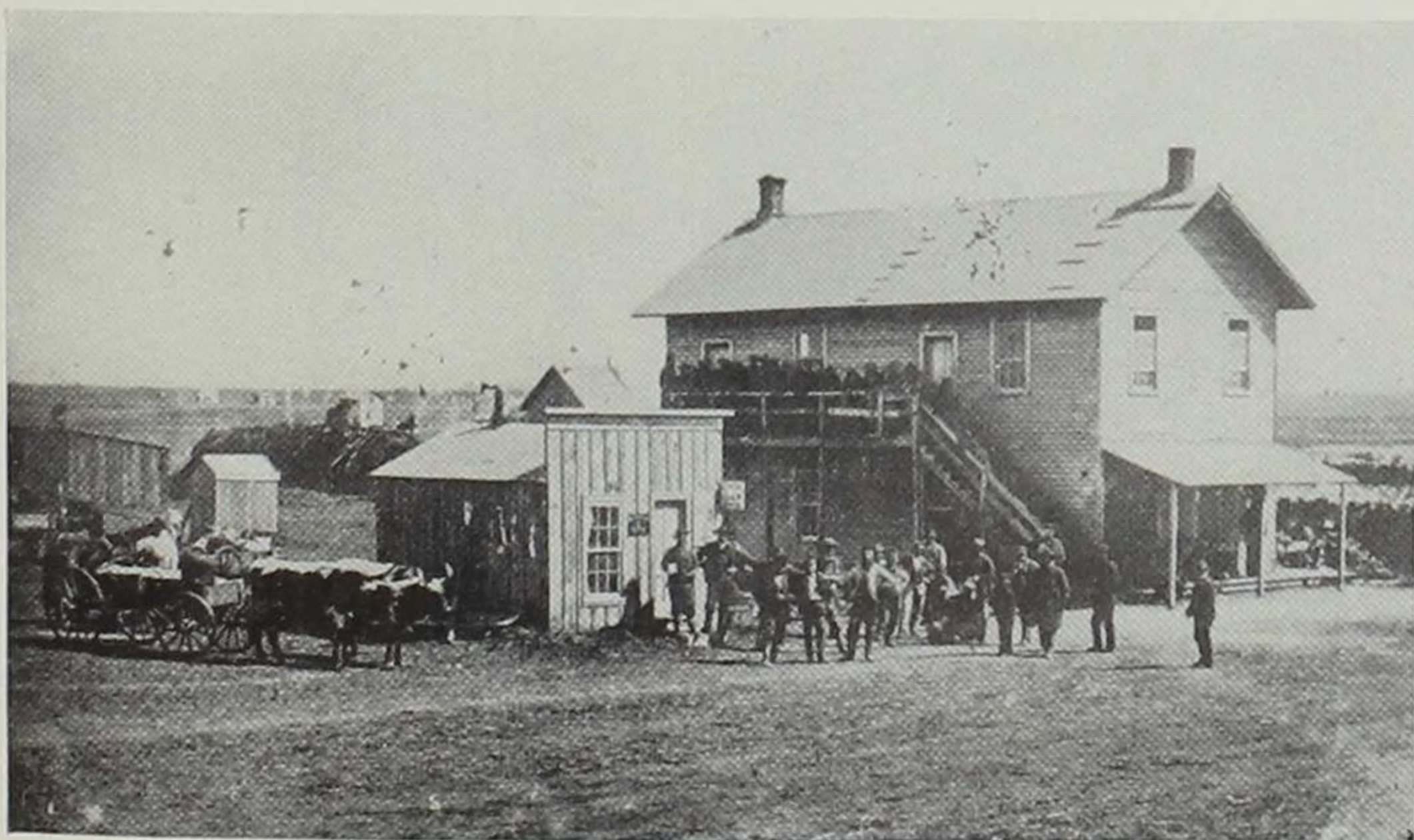


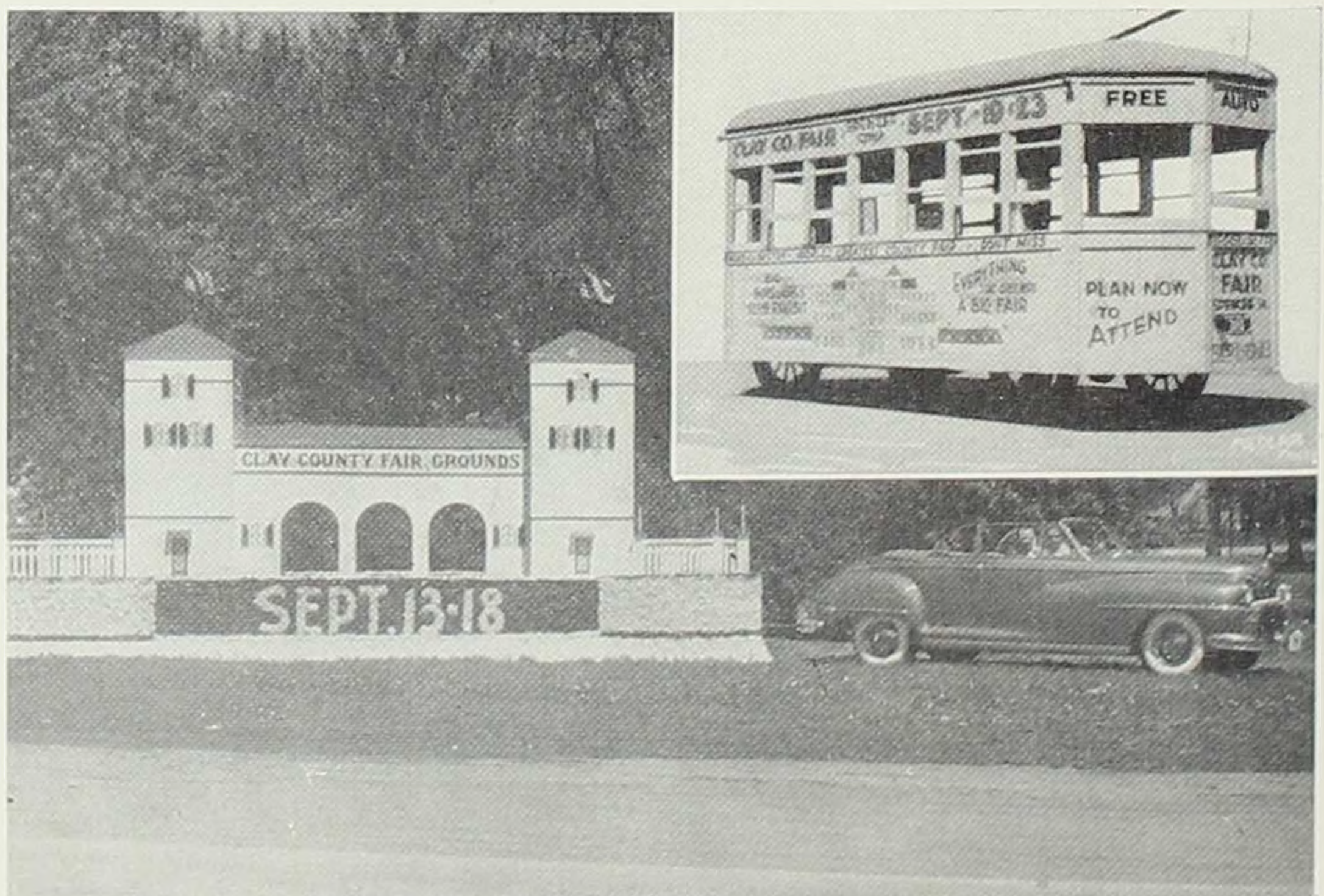
Diploma awarded in 1871 to Mrs. Jane Auringer for the best tomato and muskmelon sauces.



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.



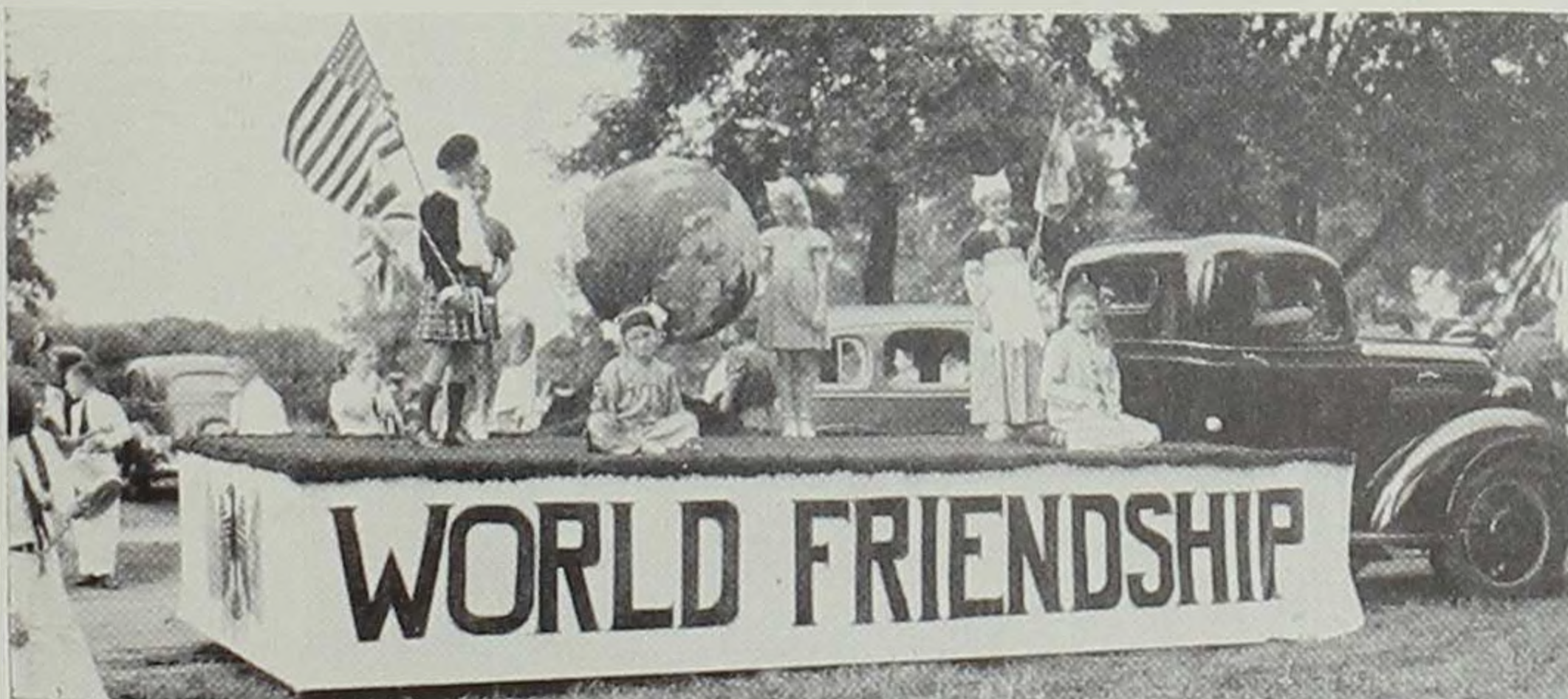
Replica of front gates taken to every large celebration within 150-mile radius of Spencer prior to 1948 fair. (Insert of street car.)



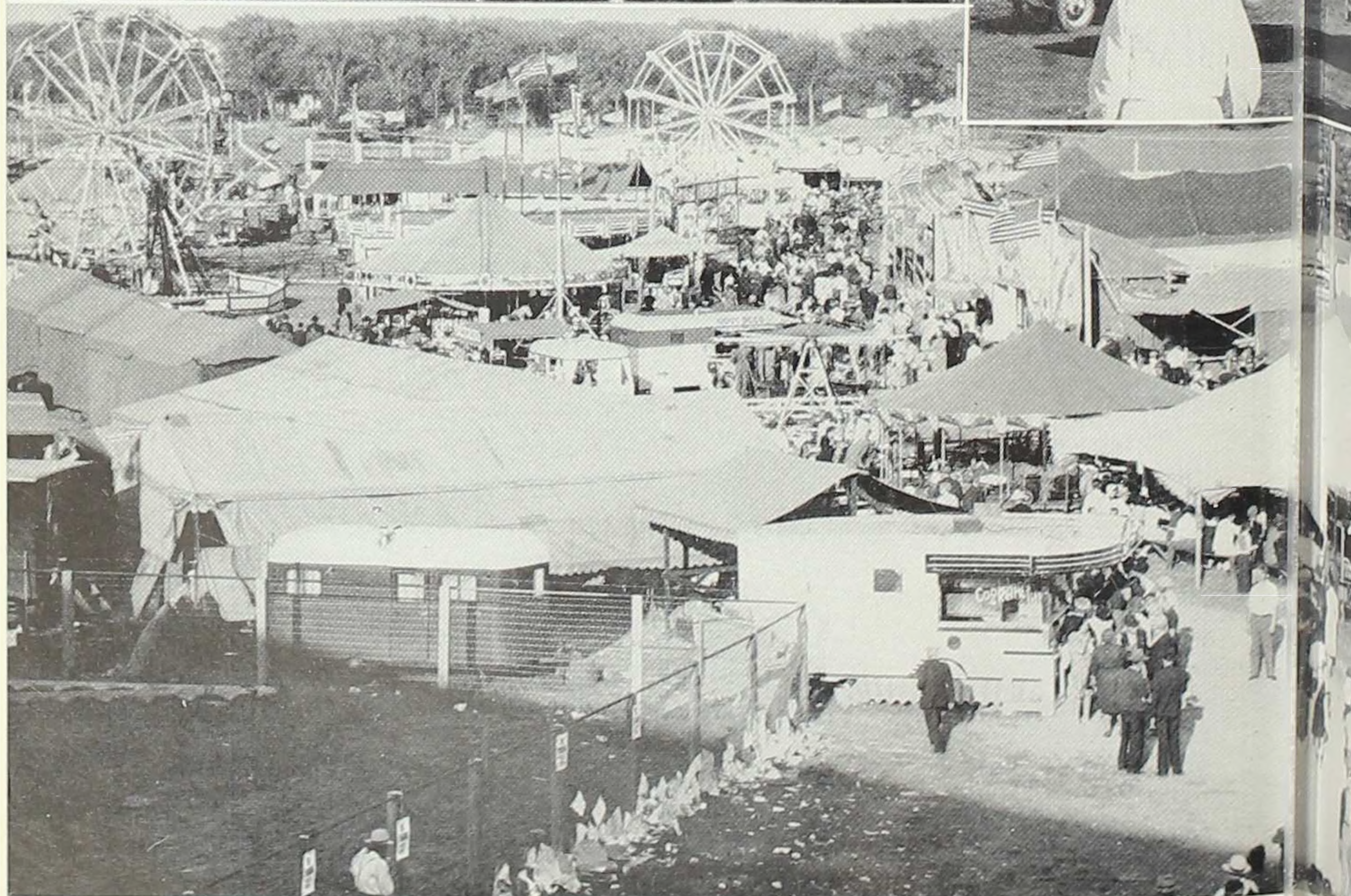
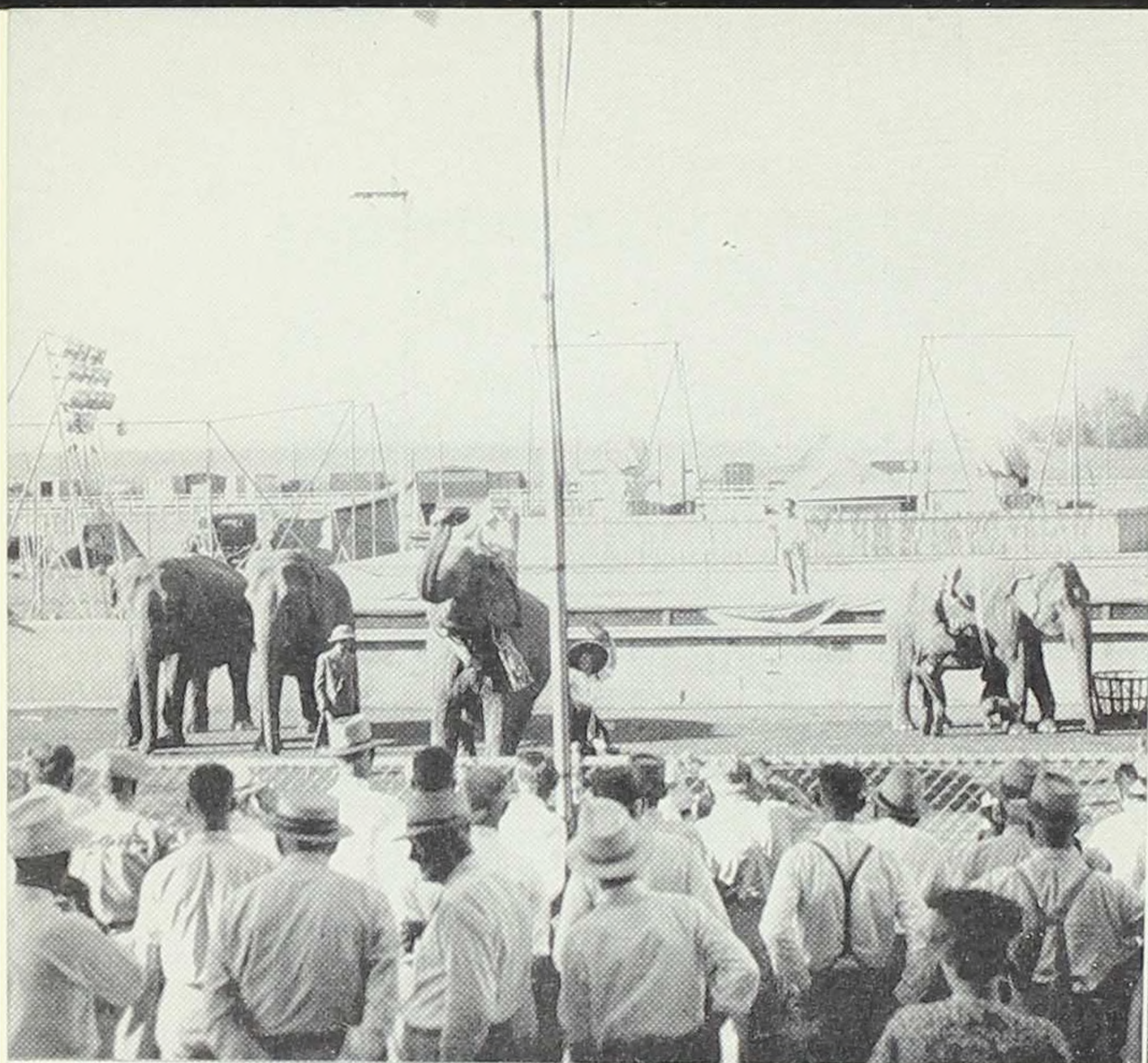
Royal, Iowa, School Float.



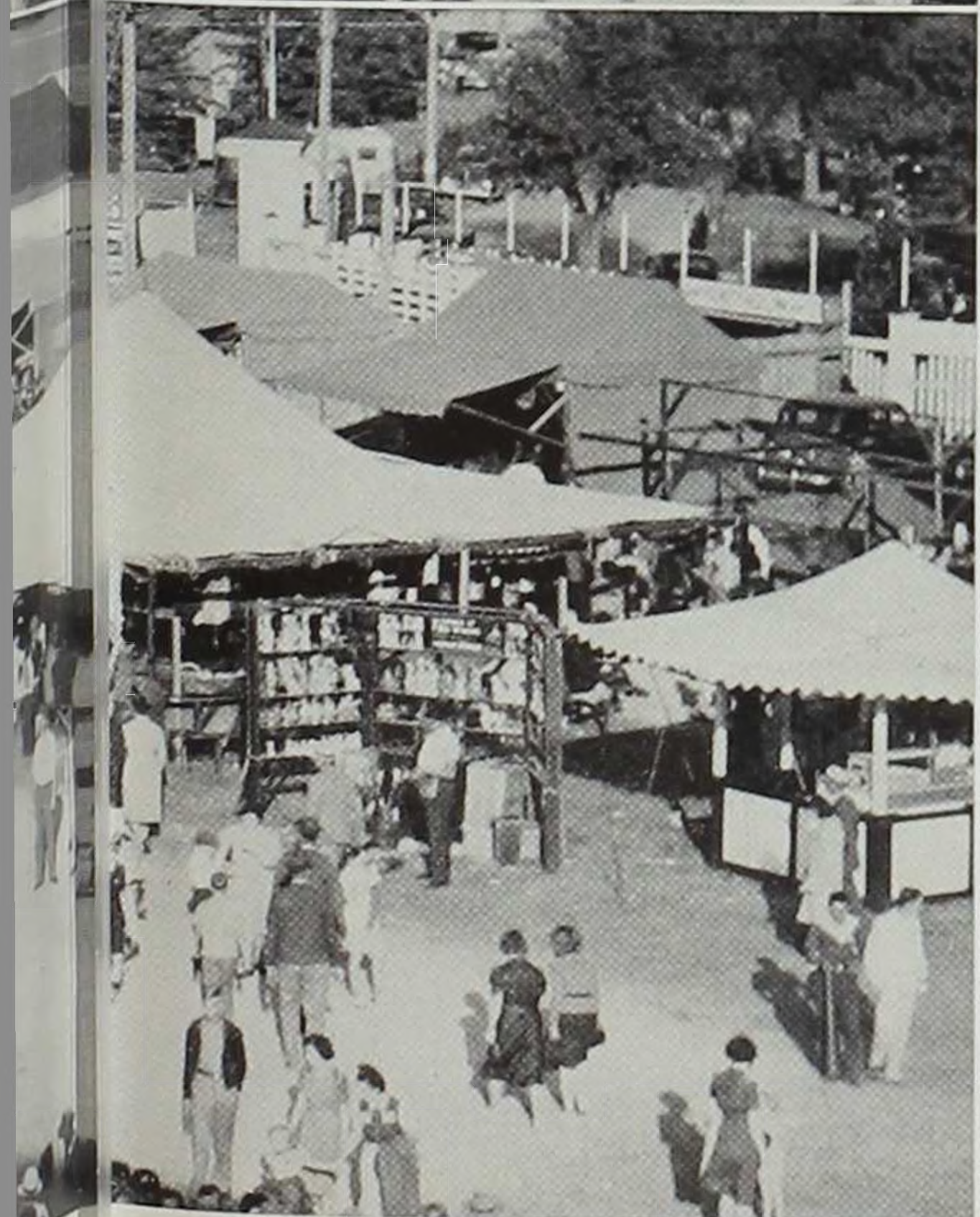
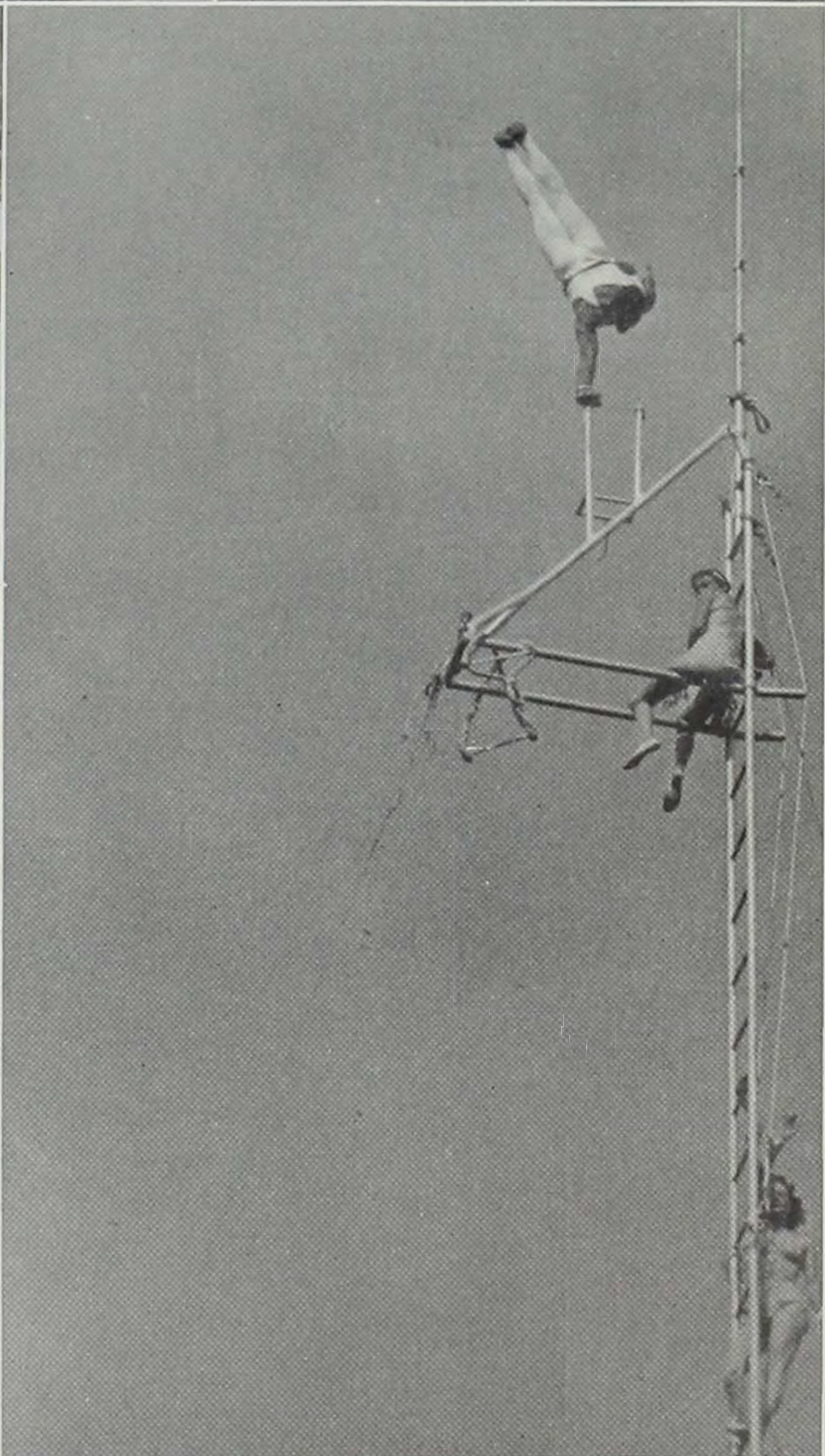
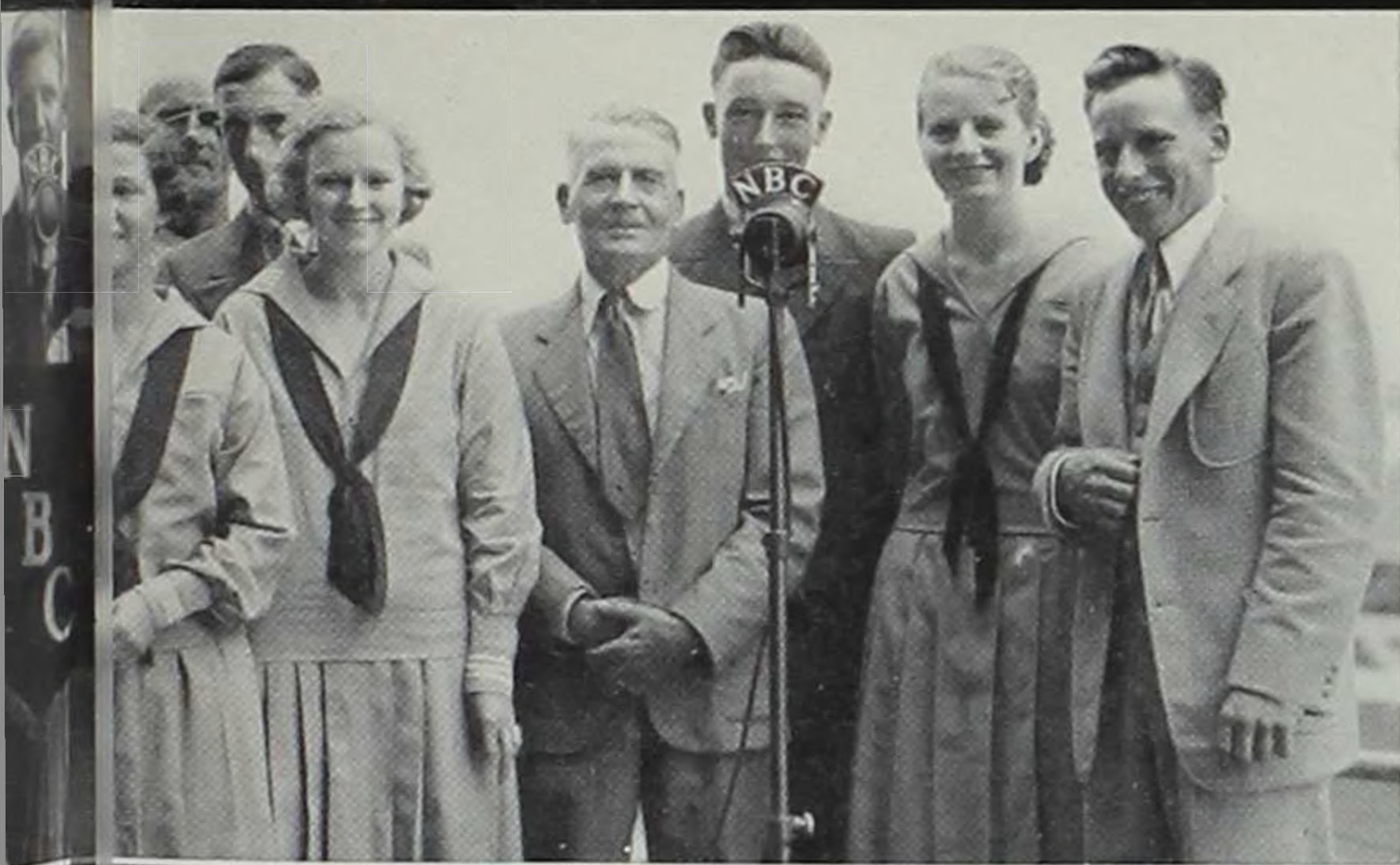
Avenue of Flags.



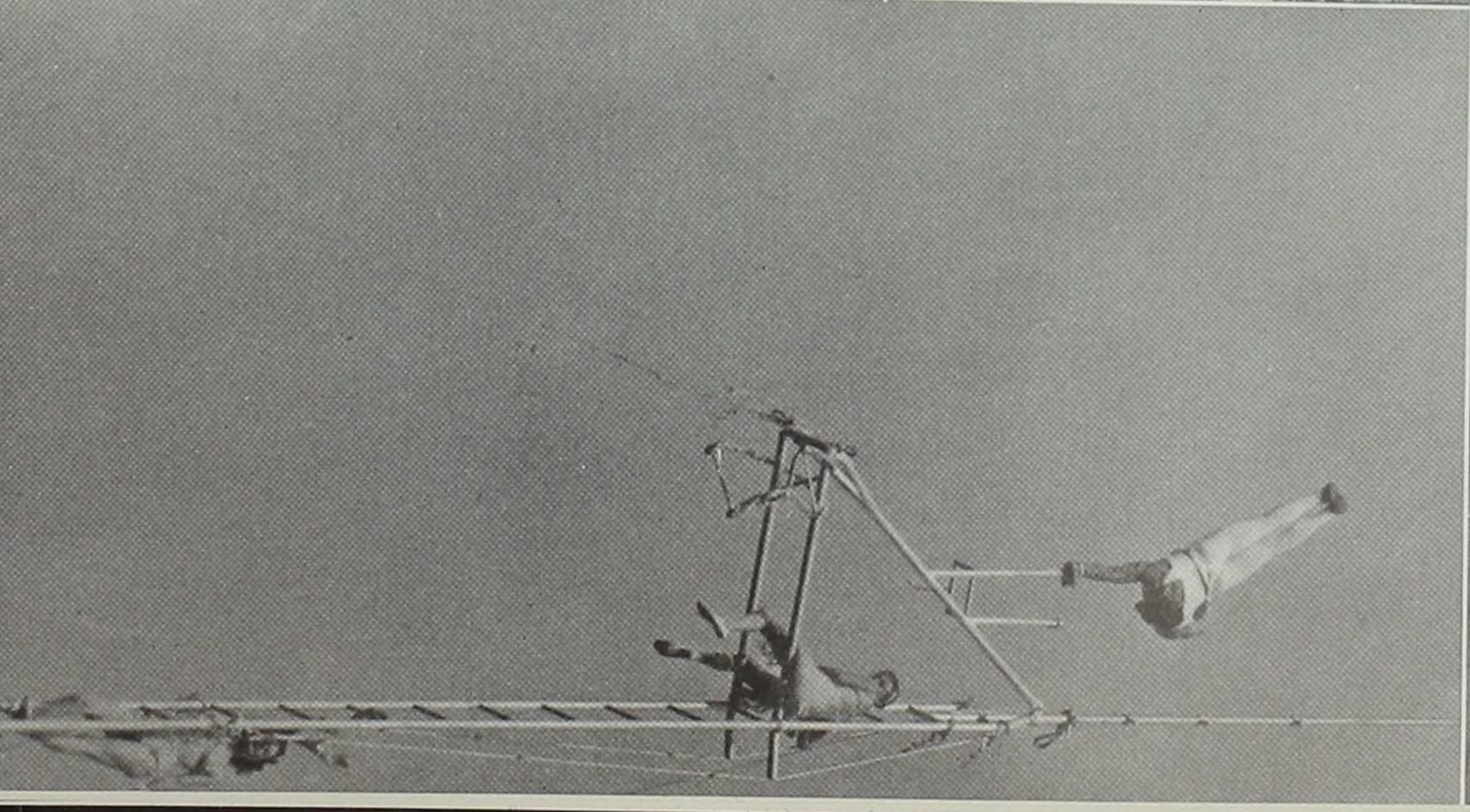
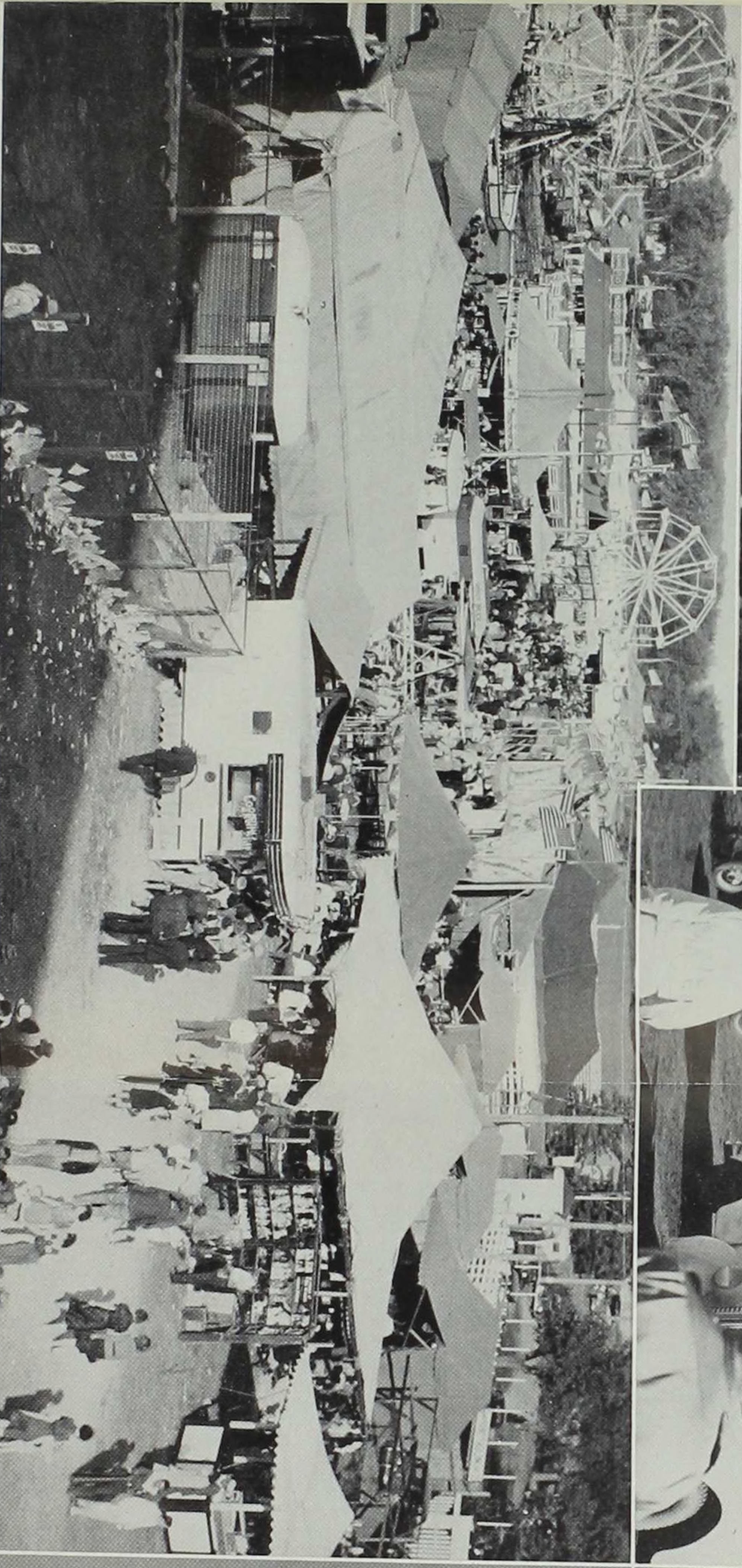
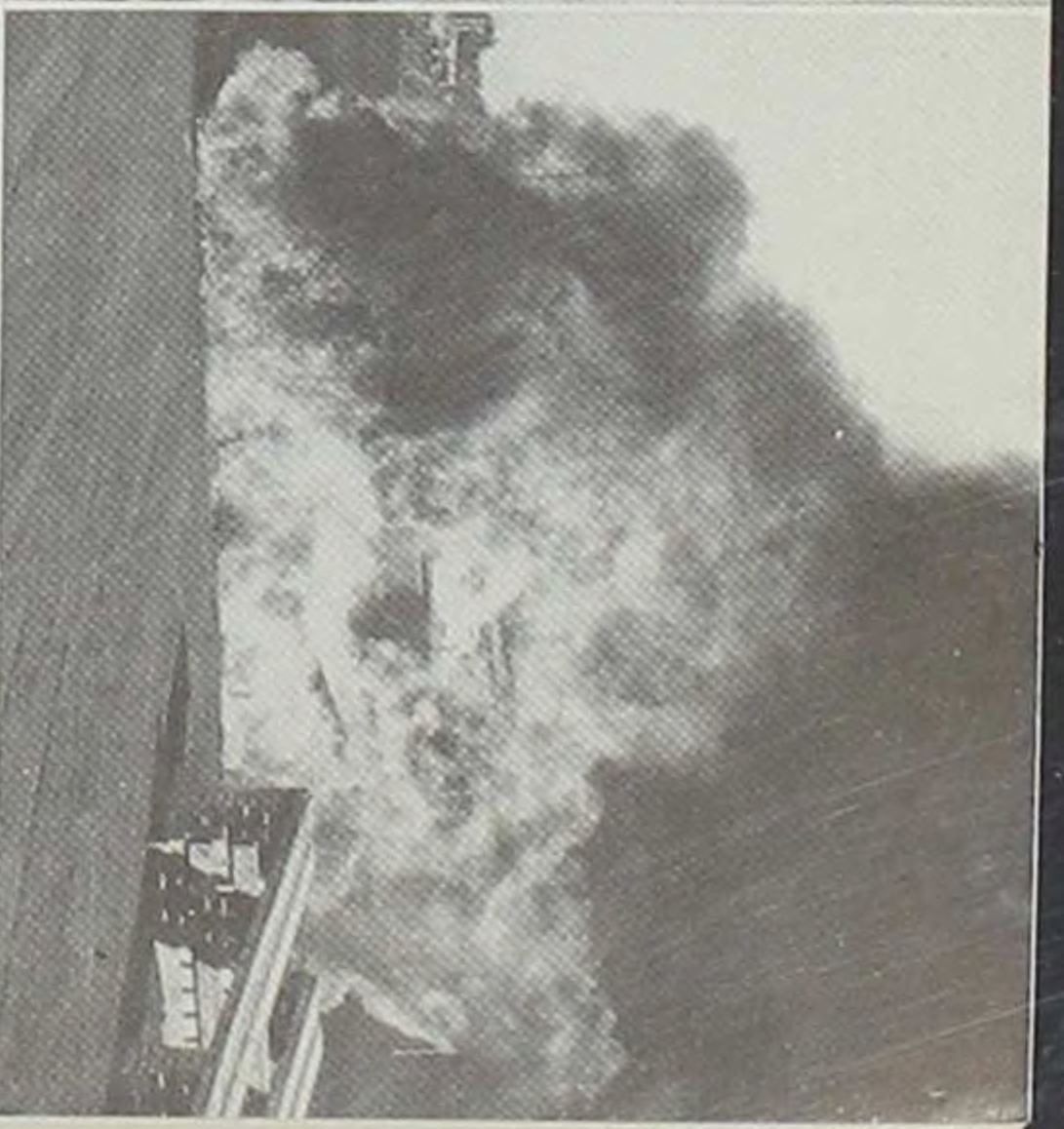
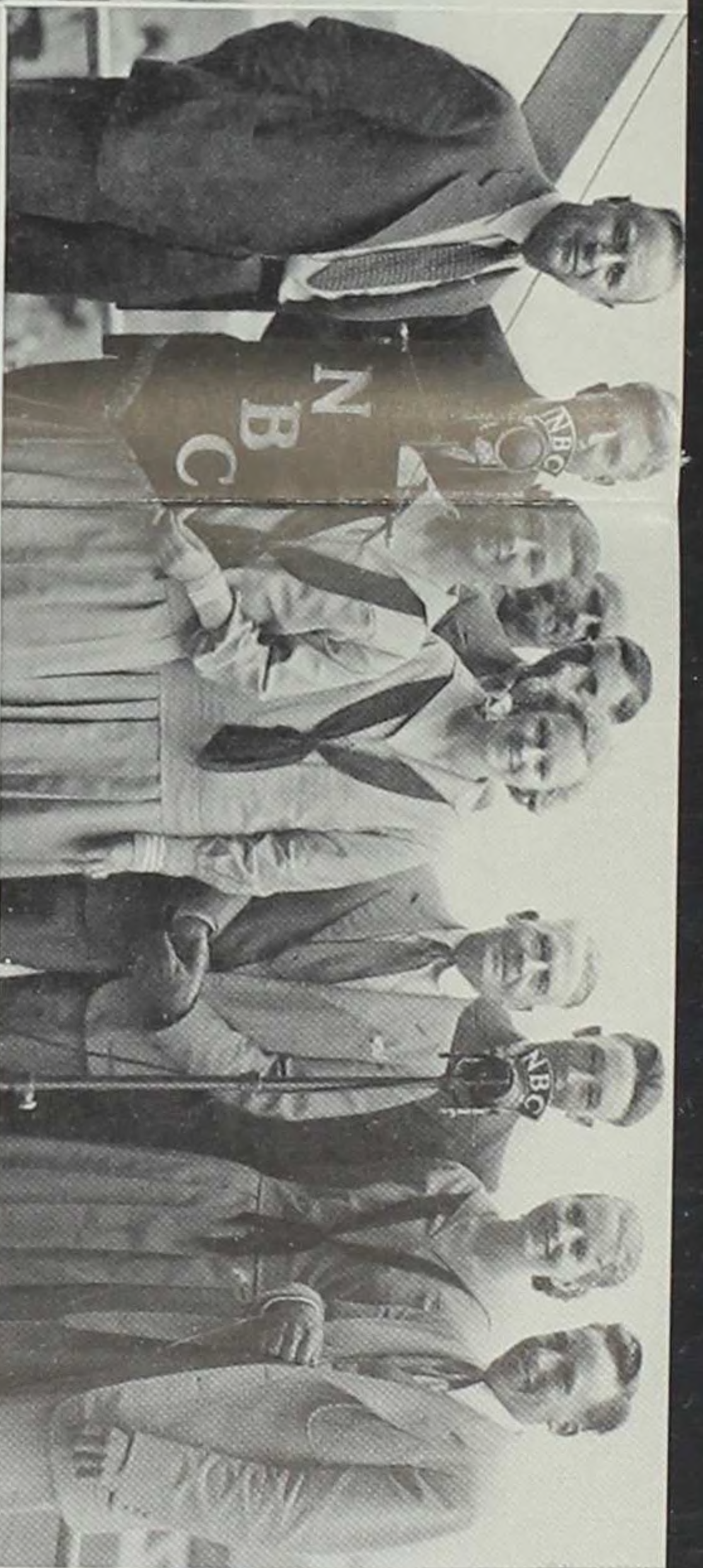
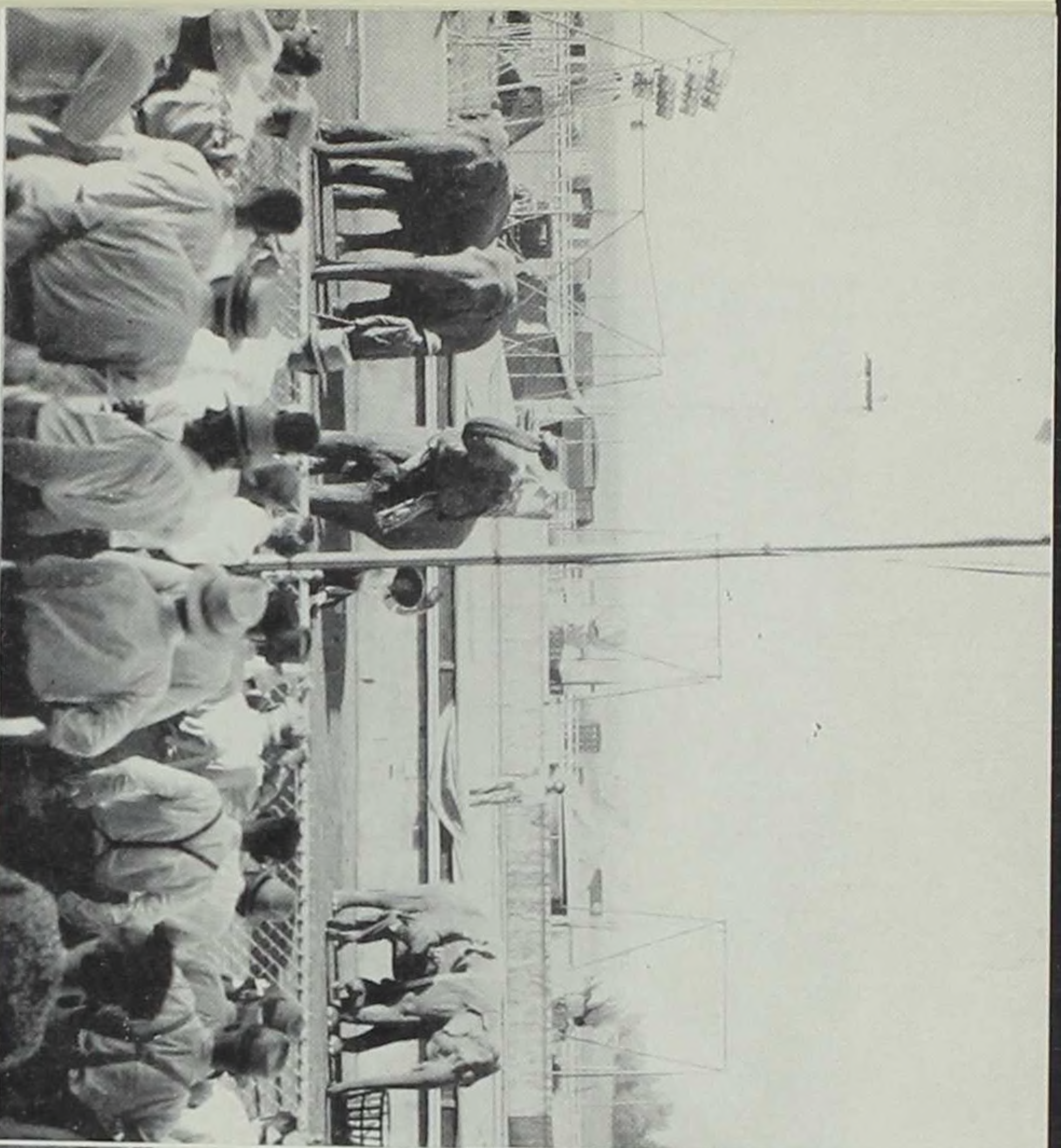
World Friendship School Float in 1938.



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.

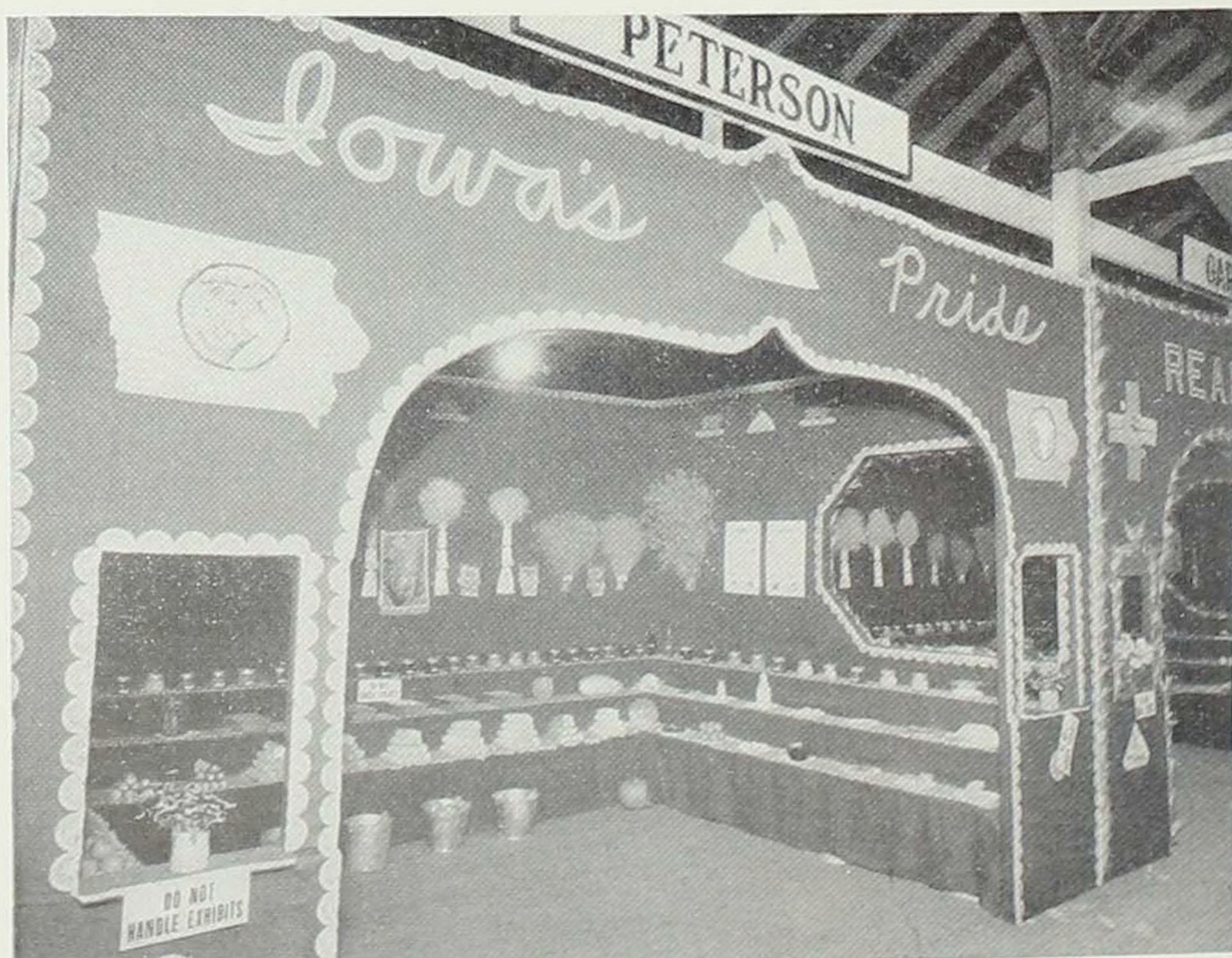


Top (left to right): Powers elephants entertain grandstand; Wm. E. Dripps and John B. Kennedy of NBC, 4-H girls Lois and Irene Madsen, H. Bruce Noll, Clarence Smith, Jr., Lucille Duncan, and Keith Burkhardt at the 15-minute broadcast over NBC on September 13, 1936, advertising World's Greatest Country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

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Table Arrangements at Flower Show in 1948.



Peterson Township Booth — First Place Winner in 1949.



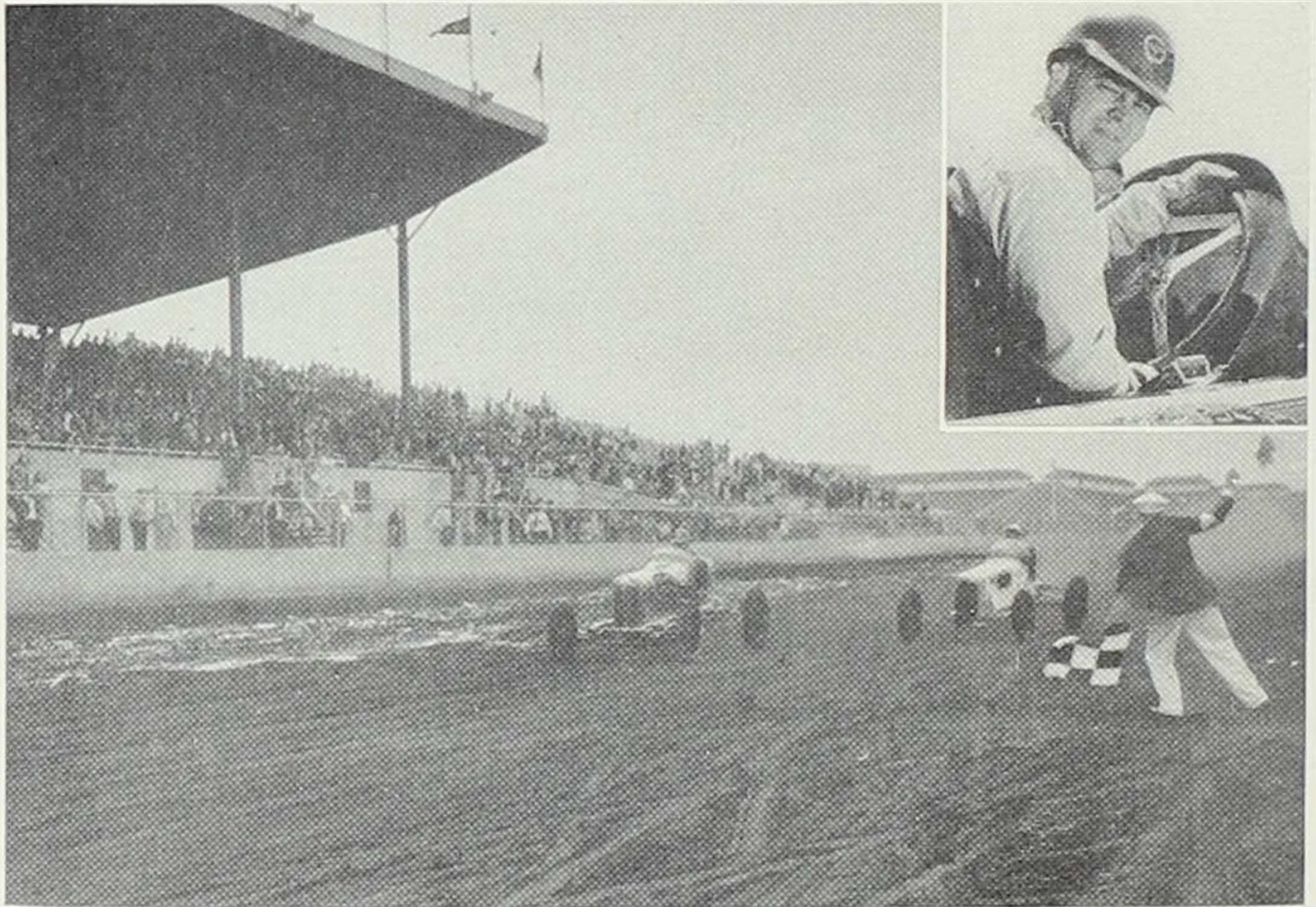
Million Dollar Livestock Parade.



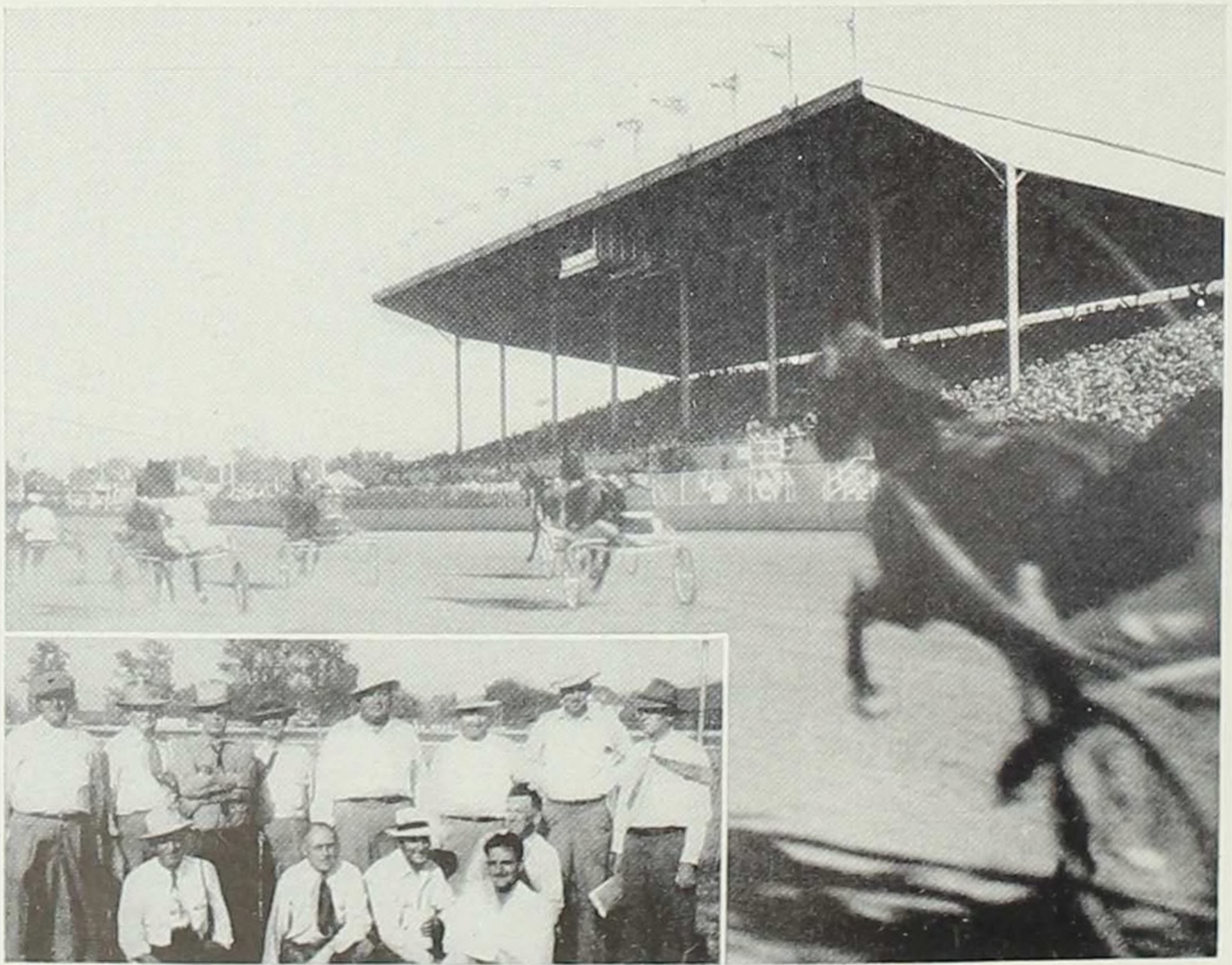
Joan Snyder of Linn Grove and Her District Grand Champion Hereford.



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