

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