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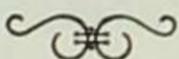
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Fairs of Homestead Days

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