

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.

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