

The Reunion Today

Since the close of World War II, the idea of holding threshers reunions has experienced phenomenal growth in the United States. In 1965, for example, the National Threshers Association, Inc. held its 21st annual reunion in the Fulton County Fairgrounds near Wauseon, Ohio. In this same 20-year period other reunions were established such as the Old Rough and Tumble Engineers Reunion, Kinzers, Pennsylvania; Antique Engine & Threshers Assn., Hoisington, Kansas; Annual Steam Engine Day, Gilmar Johnson farm, Fred-eric, Wisconsin; National Threshing Bee, Mont-gomery, Minnesota; and Zehr's Central Steam Engine & Thresher Historical Association, at Pon-tiac, Illinois.

It was the visit of the Henry County quartet of steam engine hobbyists to Pontiac that led to the start of the Midwest Old Settlers and Threshers Association at Mount Pleasant in 1950. Fifteen years later, in 1965, the *Iron-Men Album Magazine* of May-June carried a beautiful aerial photo of the reunion grounds at McMillan Park in Mount Pleasant.

The interest manifested in the Old Threshers Association was not limited to Mount Pleasant

and Henry County. The success of the latter has encouraged a number of other Iowa communities in recent years to attempt similar reunions. Probably the most recent in Iowa is the Mississippi Valley Steam Engine Show held on the Justin Hingtgen farm on U. S. Highway 61, eighteen miles south of Dubuque. One of the twenty engines featured during the 3-day session August 27, 28, 29, 1965, was the 6 hp Nichols & Shepard engine owned by Ray Ernst of Wayland, one of the founders of the Mount Pleasant Reunion.

The unflagging spirit manifested by steam hobbyists such as Ray Ernst is difficult for the uninitiated to understand. One of the best interpretations of their enthusiasm can be found in the article by Clifford B. Hicks in *Popular Mechanics* for September, 1958. Hicks relates:

But the old steamer had a relatively short life before it chugged out to pasture behind the barn. Suddenly, in the '20s, came the modern farm tractor with its gasoline engine. Within a span of four or five years the owner of a steamer, once the ruler of the farm roost, found his business melting away to the vanishing point. Each fall, hundreds of the old engines drew a final gasp through their iron lungs. In the '30s you could spot many of these derelicts rusting away behind barns all across the country.

Now comes the hobbyist, the steamer fan. He has a quirk in his mind, and he's the first to admit it. Admit? He can't help talking about it. He's fascinated by the old steamers, just as others are enthralled by trains and fire engines. Only he's more so, for the steam-engine

"buff" will invest thousands of dollars in just one machine. When he finds an old derelict he buys it, repairs it with handmade parts, shines up the brass bell and whistle, and stokes up the ancient contraption to chug again. Occasionally, he pays a farmer more for a rusting hulk than the farmer paid for the same machine brand new, 40 years ago. Steam-engine fans don't make sense, and are proud of it

Other buffs, unable to find long-forgotten engines, build their own from scratch and steam proudly through the reunions. Still others build operating scale models, precise right down to the dimensions of the whistle cord and throttle.

The chuff-chuff, toot-toot of a restored engine is an irresistible call to the soul of the old-time iron man or farm hand who once sweated beside such a behemoth. The ponderous hulk of iron is a magnet. Spot a restored steamer and you'll find a gang of old-time threshers threshing over the good old days. In recent years such informal gatherings have blossomed into the reunions. A reunion simply is a gathering of buffs with their restored engines, and the old-time threshermen. (An interesting sidelight is that both buffs and iron men nurse a venomous hatred for the internal-combustion engine. After all, it displaced their beloved steamers.)

This background, of course, doesn't explain the appeal of reunions to thousands of ordinary folk who never saw a steamer in operation before. Nobody tries to explain that appeal. It just is. Wherever steam engines go, their plumes of black smoke draw astonishing crowds. Ordinary folk stand transfixed as they watch a tug of war between two of the tremendous contraptions. They cheer wildly as a group of ancient and cumbersome, but uniquely attractive steamers chug ponderously up a 45-degree slope in a hill-climbing race. Confirmed hobbyists and

threshermen drift by the hundreds from reunion to reunion, but the great bulk of spectators are folks who take a look in curiosity and remain to become fans themselves.

The number of steam engine hobbyists in Iowa is attested by the fact that 34 of the 47 engines in operation at the Midwest Old Settlers and Threshers Association in 1964 were owned by Iowans. All but a handful were from farms within a radius of 25 miles of Mount Pleasant. Twenty-two of the 34 engines actually were owned in Henry County. Eight of the 13 engines brought in from out-of-state were owned by Neal McClure of Colchester, Illinois, located within a hundred miles of Mount Pleasant. The longest distances from which engines were transported were Livonia, Michigan, and Oklahoma City.

The following is a list of steam engines on exhibition at the 1964 Threshers Reunion, giving their number in the parade, owner and residence, horsepower, and make of machine.

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| 1. Helen Wood, Des Moines, Iowa | 22 Wood Bros |
| 2. Dewese Bros., Cedar Rapids, Iowa | 18 Huber Return Flue |
| 3. Lyle Hoffmaster, Worthington, Ohio | 16 Reeves |
| 4. Amos Rixman, Oklahoma City, Okla. | 32 Reeves Cross Compound |
| 5. Fricke Bros., Mt. Union, Iowa | 25 Russell |
| 6. Shellabarger Bros., Mt. Pleasant, Iowa | 20 Russell |
| 7. R. W. Creek, Batavia, Iowa | 20-75 Nichols & Shepard |
| 8. Dean Shellhouse, Livonia, Michigan | 22 Advance Rumely |
| 9. Ray Ernst, Wayland, Iowa | 22 Advance Rumely |
| 10. Ray Ernst, Wayland, Iowa | 12 Russell |
| 11. Ray Ernst, Wayland, Iowa | 6 Nichols & Shepard |
| 12. Seyb & Kerr, Donnellson, Iowa | 22 Wood Bros |
| 13. Harold Jarvis, Washington, Iowa | 18 Advance Rumely |

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| 14. Pat Holtcamp, Winfield, Iowa | 16 Garr-Scott |
| 15. William Sater, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa | 20 Avery |
| 16. Sater Bros., Mt. Pleasant, Iowa | 16 Nichols & Shepard |
| 17. Neal McClure, Colchester, Illinois | 22 Geiser |
| 18. Neal McClure, Colchester, Illinois | 16 Russell |
| 19. Neal McClure, Colchester, Illinois | 22 Keck Gonerman |
| 20. Neal McClure, Colchester, Illinois | 21 Baker |
| 21. Neal McClure, Colchester, Illinois | 16 Garr-Scott |
| 22. Neal McClure, Colchester, Illinois | 20 Jumbo |
| 23. Neal McClure, Colchester, Illinois | 30 Huber Return Flue |
| 24. Neal McClure, Colchester, Illinois | 24 Kitten |
| 25. D. Schantz, Washington, Iowa | 20 Minneapolis |
| 26. Heaton, Donnellson, Iowa | 20 Advance Rumely |
| 27. Art Hudachek, West Liberty, Iowa | 45 Case |
| 28. John Schubert, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa | 20 Avery |
| 29. Bob Willits & Son, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa | 18 Avery |
| 30. Bob Willits & Son, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa | 40 Avery Undermounted |
| 31. C. M. Phillips, Kansas City, Missouri | 18 Avery Undermounted |
| 32. Mrs. C. M. Phillips, Kansas City, Missouri | 24 Pt. Huron |
| 33. C. M. McMillan, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa | 10 Case |
| 34. W. J. Coonrod, Center Point, Iowa | 25 Reeves |
| 35. C. L. Johnson, Peoria, Illinois | 18 Advance Rumely |
| 36. Lee Swartzendruber, Noble, Iowa | 16 Advance |
| 37. Stan Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 75 Case |
| 38. Edward Wyrick, Burlington, Iowa | 40 Case |
| 39. Everett Ramey, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa | 50 Case |
| 40. Milo Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 20 Nichols & Shepard DBL |
| 41. Milo Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 20 Rumely Single |
| 42. Milo Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 18 Colean |
| 43. Milo Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 16 Nichols & Shepard DBL |
| 44. Milo Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 20 New Giant |
| 45. Milo Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 18 Aultman Taylor |
| 46. Milo Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 40 Case |
| 47. Milo Mathews, Mt. Union, Iowa | 20 Rumely DBL |

If the list of steam engines is impressive, the list of Model Engines is equally so. Steam engines have been collected in Iowa for over a quarter of a century. During this period one individual frequently has acquired more than one of these en-

gines. In the case of the 29 Model Engines exhibited, in only two instances did owners possess more than one. Since these Model Engines were smaller and more readily transported, it is not surprising that they come from more widely scattered and distant places. Illinois was represented by 10 Models, Iowa by 5, Kansas by 4, Missouri, Nebraska and Indiana by 3 each, and Wisconsin by 1. The exhibitors and their home addresses follow:

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| 50. Otto Zwicky
Ainsworth, Iowa | 65. Delbert Kemp
Washburn, Illinois |
| 51. Dan Evans
Cambridge, Illinois | 66. E. H. Jacobs
Smith Center, Kansas |
| 52. Art Flack
Alpha, Illinois | 67. E. L. Badenhop
Kensington, Kansas |
| 53. Ralph Kain
Milan, Illinois | 68. Dave Powell
Colchester, Illinois |
| 54. E. P. Lane
Atkinson, Illinois | 69. Dave Powell
Colchester, Illinois |
| 55. Webb Mooney
Nortonville, Kansas | 70. Wendell Turner
Oakland, Iowa |
| 56. Orvil Morey
Kewanee, Illinois | 71. Leroy White
Mt. Pleasant, Iowa |
| 57. Gerald Stinebring
Joliet, Illinois | 72. Charles Vornholt
Solon, Iowa |
| 58. Ross Naylor
Platte City, Missouri | 73. Leon Vandervoort
Tomah, Wisconsin |
| 59. Murdock & Culver
Lyndon, Kansas | 74. L. H. McKinney
Cairo, Missouri |
| 60. A. J. Goodban
York, Nebraska | 75. C. B. Killing
Coal Valley, Illinois |
| 61. Claud Murphy
Thayer, Nebraska | 76. Chas. Johnson
Springfield, Ohio |
| 62. Ralph Shellburne
Zionsville, Indiana | 77. Bob Snow
Palmyra, Missouri |
| 63. Ralph Shellburne
Zionsville, Indiana | 78. A. H. Cummings
Pella, Iowa |
| 64. Ralph Shellburne
Zionsville, Indiana | |

It is not surprising, perhaps, that the Iron-Men who operated the steam engines should display genuine affection for the Iron Horse. Just as their steam engine had given way to the gasoline engine so the steam railroad locomotive had given way to the diesel engine. An 1891 locomotive with a "cabbage stack" marked the beginning of a collection of antique railroad rolling stock. It was acquired in 1960 in South Carolina, and was dubbed No. 6 of the "Midwest Central Railroad." Since its acquisition, a mile-long narrow gauge track has been built that circles 40-acre McMillan Park. "Old No. 6" pulls two coaches and a caboose with passengers and is never wanting for riders.

Soon followed the famous Mark Twain Zephyr of the Burlington Railroad. Its three cars, plus one from the Pioneer Zephyr, and the power unit, *Injun Joe*, are an added attraction, but for display only.

In 1966 the directors bought a Shay logging locomotive in California which was to be shipped east in August in time for the 17th Annual Reunion.

The centennial of the outbreak of the Civil War was not forgotten by the Midwest Old Settlers and Threshers Association. The following is reproduced from the official Fourteenth Annual Reunion program that was held in Mount Pleasant in 1962:

**Midwest Old Settlers & Threshers Association
and
Henry County Civil War Centennial Commission**

PRESENT

"Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory"

(A CENTENNIAL PAGEANT IN 14 SCENES)

by Helen M. Virden

(A TRIBUTE TO THOSE SOLDIERS, BOTH BLUE AND GRAY, AND
THEIR FOUR UNFORGETTABLE YEARS OF VALOR)

1862

1962

The popularity of the Civil War pageant in 1962 led the directors to choose another popular theme out of Iowa's historic past for 1963—Chautauqua. With tongue in cheek, perhaps, since a 64-page issue of *THE PALIMPSEST* had appeared on Chautauqua in Iowa in May of 1962, the Mount Pleasant Chamber of Commerce feigned ignorance of Chautauqua. In order to gain good press coverage, it sent out a plea through its publicity channels for readers to send in "Chautauqua Ideas." The unusual advertisement, while gaining the desired widespread attention (al-

though not as much, perhaps, as did Grant Wood's advertisement for a suit of old-fashioned red woolen underwear) read as follows:

WANTED: CHAUTAUQUA IDEAS

Chautauqua was the medium through which culture and entertainment reached the public from 1874 until the early '30s. Before the advent of movies, TV or radio, the Chautauqua was entertaining and instructing some 40 million Americans and Canadians each year.

The Mt. Pleasant, Ia., Chamber of Commerce is looking for any ideas that will help it recreate an authentic Chautauqua for the September Midwest Old Settlers' and Threshers' Reunion.

Oldtimers will remember the Chautauqua for its oratory, music, drama, bell-ringers, lecturers, cooking schools, crusaders and evangelists. Chautauqua derived its name from meetings held on the shore of Lake Chautauqua in New York.

If you are in the possession of facts that will help Mt. Pleasant accurately portray a Chautauqua, please write to Box 109, Mt. Pleasant, Ia.

The response to this request was widespread, particularly in Iowa and neighboring states. It even attracted the attention of several columnists. One such response, appearing in the *Prairie Farmer* of August 3, 1963, was by Martha Crane, a former Mount Pleasant girl, who had vivid recollections of those good old Chautauqua days. In her column she writes:

When we were youngsters growing up in a small town in southeastern Iowa, summer meant two big events the Henry County Fair and Chautauqua Week!

The big Chautauqua tent went up for seven days in June on the lot back of old Central school. The fair came later in August. And we hoarded our pennies so we could attend both.

There are still county fairs. But the era of the Chautauqua has come and gone. Yet between the years of 1910 and 1930, Chautauquas attracted more than 35,000,000 people annually. Throughout the summer these millions would travel miles over dusty roads and sit on hard planks under hot canvas tents to hear lecturers, actors, humorists, and famous bands.

How does one describe the thrill of Chautauqua week to those who never had this experience? Well, imagine living in the country or a small town in the days before sound movies, radio, and television. Roads were poor, cars few and unpredictable. Entertainment consisted largely of home talent plays and a few lecture courses in county seat towns

William Jennings Bryan was one of Chautauqua's greatest attractions for years. Russell N. Conwell presented his lecture "Acres of Diamonds" more than 6000 times

There were famed musical groups—the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra, the Swiss Bell Ringers, and Kryl's Band. And plays from New York with original big city scenery—"The Melting Pot," "H. M. S. Pinafore," and "Little Women."

The Chautauqua—so typically American! It's gone, but not forgotten by many who saw their first great lecturer, national figure, or professional play on a local Chautauqua stage.

The modest admission fee charged those who attend the Old Settlers and Threshers Reunion is without doubt an important factor in maintaining

its popularity down to its 17th Reunion in 1966. A Membership Button costing only one dollar allows the person wearing it to return morning, noon and night throughout the Reunion with no additional entrance charge. Moreover, mindful of their desire to educate and inspire young and old alike, children under high school age have always been admitted free. For good fellowship and fun mixed with a bit of nostalgic education, the Mount Pleasant Reunion has few if any equals throughout the United States.

In 1965, according to the official count, more than 200,000 "dropped by" from most of the states as well as several foreign countries to see the Midwest Threshers on parade. The prospects for an even greater attendance looms large for 1966. An advance press notice declared:

One of the unique parts of the five-day show is the only authentic narrow gauge railroad in operation in the Midwest. It carries passengers on more than a mile of track around the Reunion grounds.

Expansion plans this year include a new, large building to display the old agricultural exhibits and the Corliss engines. Antiques for sale and display, the complete Midwest Village, sorghum making, threshing, wood sawing, spinning and other household crafts make this show one everyone in the family will enjoy.

The 1966 Reunion promises not to be eclipsed in color and pageantry by any of its predecessors. Already featuring many attractions, the outstanding one for 1966 will be entitled "Kings of the

Road," a 60-year pageant of automobiles. A widely quoted press release from Mount Pleasant reprinted in the *Keokuk Gate City* of July 13 reads:

The Southeast Iowa Antique Car club display has been a long-time favorite of the visitors attending the annual five-day event. The pageant of cars of last year was so well received they are returning with another production by popular demand. The age when America took to the road comes alive as the cars and owners participate in an action-packed drama, interspersed with fun, music and song.

It is one thing to see a car of a 1902 vintage shined and polished in a museum, but it is quite another to see a 1902 Olds driving along a dirt track as it did when it was King of the road.

Almost a hundred antique cars will be on display and most of them will appear in the pageant. The production will be as nostalgic as an old family album and will be presented Sunday evening of the show.

No small number of those who attend consider the antique cars one of the most important features of the Reunion. The increasing role of these colorful reminders of yesteryears is yearly becoming more apparent.

During the past sixteen years the Old Settlers and Threshers have won warm support by the spoken word and by newspaper columnists who have been delighted with what they saw. Gary Vogelaar expressed his feelings in two full columns in the *Pella Chronicle* in which almost every

feature of the Reunion was described in some detail. He concluded as follows:

We were all starting to drag toward evening and it was a grand feeling when at last we were in the car and homeward bound. The day was rehashed and we were all of the same opinion, that it was a day well spent and we would recommend that if you enjoy old relics and machinery of the past, then drive to Mount Pleasant when they have their next reunion and spend a day with the good people of Mount Pleasant.

None have caught the spirit and expressed it better than Evelyn Birkby in *Kitchen-Klatter Magazine* for November 1963:

Never have we seen so many happy faces in such a large group. Not a cross word was spoken. No one hurried or rushed or acted pressured. No commercial *come-on* dinned into our ears to *do this* or *do that!* It is not just the old threshing machines, steam engines and marvelous threshers' meals which have been reconstructed at Mt. Pleasant, but the very neighborly, friendly spirit of those early days as well.

It is this homespun atmosphere, pervading every nook and corner of the Midwest Old Settlers and Threshers Reunion, that has kindled the imagination, warmed the heart, and brought back such nostalgic memories for those who gather at McMillan Park year after year. It is an atmosphere that can only be created through love, friendship, and good-natured cooperation.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN