The Pioneer Period

"The First Fair was an experiment — derided by some — passed by with indifference, or openly discountenanced by others", according to the secretary of the State Agricultural Society; but the second fair established the fact "that a State Society for the Promotion of Agriculture and Mechanics can and will be sustained by the people of Iowa." From such an auspicious, if humble beginning, despite all difficulties and distractions of wars, panics, and competing "world" expositions, the Iowa State Fair has been held every year with the exception of 1898. Because of "the feeling existing over the state adverse to holding a fair" that year, the Iowa Society coöperated with the Trans-Mississippi Exposition at Omaha.

In the pioneer years down to the seventies, while the organization and activities of the annual exhibition remained simple and primitive, the agricultural fair probably was relatively more influential than at any other time. In this "golden age" of the fair, before the rise of the Grange and the development of the agricultural colleges or other systematized governmental activities, the agricultural societies, functioning mainly through their public demonstrations, had the field to themselves. They were rudimentary colleges, experiment stations, and

extension demonstrators. Rather incidentally, they also anticipated some of the recreational features that have been emphasized by the Grange and the Farm Bureau.

From 1854 to 1879 the fair was "on wheels", moving around from one section of the State to another. Not over three consecutive exhibitions were held in any city. Inaugurated at Fairfield in 1854 and 1855, the third and fourth fairs were in Muscatine in 1856 and 1857, Oskaloosa entertained in 1858 and 1859, then Iowa City in 1860 and 1861, Dubuque in 1862 and 1863, Burlington in 1864, 1865, and 1866, Clinton in 1867 and 1868, Keokuk in 1869 and 1870 and again in 1874 and 1875, while Cedar Rapids seems to have been the favorite location with a record of six years, in 1871, 1872, 1873, 1876, 1877, and 1878. As a rule the grounds and equipment of the county or district agricultural societies were utilized, though the area usually had to be extended, old buildings altered and new ones erected, and a race track constructed or improved. Inevitably there was more or less inter-city and regional rivalry and jealousy over the location, but it never became as bitter as in some neighboring States. The Iowa society did not follow the practice of some of its contemporaries of deliberately fostering such rivalry by a system of competitive bidding.

Unquestionably the itinerant system of exhibition best met pioneer needs and insured to the society the largest support. The report for 1869 concluded that

the experience of Iowa, as well as other western States, indicated that the "true policy of such societies is to give each portion of the state, in its turn, the benefits of the annual exhibition". These benefits were held to be inducements to breeders of fine stock to exhibit and find a market; a comparison and competitive examination of implements; the opportunity for exhibitors to reach a new group of people every two or three years; the opportunity for people of each region to exhibit their local products; and, finally, provision of amusement and recreation for a larger number than if the fair were located permanently in one place.

The pioneer fairs were primarily instructional and only incidentally recreational. In many ways the State exhibition was much more akin to a farmers institute or a farm and home week than to a modern State fair. Based upon the old cattle show, the exhibition and judging of stock was the central feature; whatever else was done, the show was *the thing*. The chief obstacle to this most essential part of the exhibition was in securing competent men for the judging committees. For the fair of 1857 it was reported that many of the judges selected did not appear and several hours delay was caused by filling vacancies from by-standers. In the secretary's opinion a decided reform was necessary: "*The standing if not the very existence of the Society depends upon it;* and whether any improvement can be effected till our system of Railroads shall bring the

Annual Exhibition almost to every Committee-Man's doors remains to be seen."

Evening sessions, held in a city hall or church, were regular features of the early fairs. Farmers and agricultural experts exchanged experiences and discussed best breeds of animals, varieties of grain, grasses, fruits, and vegetables, systems of rotation, the use of machinery, and marketing opportunities. According to the consensus of opinion at the seventh State fair, Spanish Merino sheep were best adapted to Iowa, though prairie hay was bad for any kind. Suffolk swine were generally preferred, but a few farmers favored Chester Whites.

The annual addresses had a prominent place on the program of all early western State fairs. Each fair was officially opened by the president of the State Agricultural Society in a talk, usually of considerable length, reviewing existing economic and social conditions of the State. This was sometimes supplemented by more formal addresses by visiting celebrities, though Iowa indulged less in this high-priced talent than her neighbors. The serious purpose of the spectators and their thirst for information and inspiration was conclusively demonstrated by the not only patient but enthusiastic hearing which they gave to these extended discourses.

Even newspaper reports were made the object of competitive emulation by premiums for the best "history" of the exposition. The resulting stories, in an age of lingering exuberant and ornate style,

provided some remarkable displays of journalistic rhetoric. "Early in the morning", wrote a reporter in the Burlington *Daily Telegraph,* "an enlivening scene was presented in the ladies' department, or that devoted to domestic manufactures. The ringing of merry voices, the flitting about of fairy forms, the glances of bright eyes, and the busy play of pretty hands, all denoted that womandom had entered the lists in earnest." In 1860 the editor of the Iowa City *Republican* regretted that he could not do justice to the grand procession of prize-winning live stock, but his supply of adjectives had already been seriously impaired and he needed a "whole dictionary of them" to express his admiration. "Suffice it to say that the procession filled the half-mile track completely, and its appearance was enough to fill a stock grower's heart with joy. If our readers are not satisfied with this description, let them set their imagination on a 'high horse' and after exhausting its capacity write the results just before the characters we now print — !!!!!"

Amusement features were strictly subordinated to the serious purpose in hand. Such entertainment as was provided was made to contribute wherever possible to the ends of instruction. Plowing matches, for instance, were dignified by careful supervision and regulation. In the first plowing contest under the auspices of the State Agricultural Society in 1857, each of the seven contestants plowed a "land" of one-fourth acre in "old, loose and sandy" soil,

turning a furrow at least six inches deep. The shortest time required was forty-eight minutes and the longest sixty-one minutes.

The next year one of the most interesting and "important features of the whole Exhibition was the Plowing Match". The prize was actually awarded to the slowest plower on the principle that it is "vastly more important that the plowing be *well done,* than that it be *speedily* done. Every experienced farmer would prefer that his team should plow one acre *well,* than to skim over, 'cut and cover,' three acres, in the same length of time." But the chief reason why J. H. Sherrol of Black Hawk County won the match was because he used an improved John Deere plow with a revolving coulter. Thus "the great lesson taught" by this contest was "the importance of procuring the most perfect implements".

Throughout these years there was much opposition, both on grounds of economy and moral propriety, to horse racing, and, as a result, this part of the program was restricted and denatured. At times the "trials of speed" were restricted to judging of animals, one at a time, for speed and other driving qualities. An effort was made in any case to time this superfluity so as not to distract the attention of the spectators unduly from the serious portions of the exhibition. Although a man "may be examining a specimen of his favorite short-horns with almost infinite delight," wrote the secretary in 1856, "the

moment he is informed 'the horses are trotting,' he drops his short-horn, and rushes for the ring.''

Meager reports of these ''trials'' do not indicate particularly sportive propensities, either on the part of the managers or their constituency. The best official time at the Muscatine fair in 1857 was 2:58, 2:59, 3:03, and 3:05. In 1865 a county fair offered as its complete ''speed'' program, $1 to the fastest walking horse, and similar purses to the fastest trotter, and the fastest ''horse under the saddle''. It is reported that the management regarded these expenditures as a needless extravagance.

From 1857 to 1863 Tom Hyer, a Black Hawk Morgan trotting stallion owned by John S. Wolf of Cedar Rapids, regularly won first prize for the best roadster over four years old, except in 1860 when he was beaten by Young Bashaw. But the following year he was not only rated first in his class but carried off the sweepstakes ribbon also.

Even the chaste ''female equestrianism'', which an emotional reporter at the first fair pronounced ''the most thrillingly interesting and sublimely beautiful spectacle which has ever been presented within our borders,'' did not escape the puritanical censor. Of such a display at Dubuque in 1862, which was promoted by local citizens and not an official part of the fair, the official ''historian'' observed that ''fast riding seemed to attract the most applause, but one or two who rode at a slower pace'' apparently considered that ''horse racing, as such,

was scarcely an appropriate amusement for their sex, even if done to amuse the public.'' In the judicious opinion of this critical observer these performances were both distracting and improper. ''Woman's place'' at the State fair, as he saw it, was to be far less conspicuous. ''Horseback riding by ladies is highly commendable as a graceful, healthful, and beautiful exercise, when not done entirely for display; but it is questionable whether 'female equestrianism' is essential to a good horse show, and we believe the Agricultural Society very properly discourages such exhibitions. Specimens of the skill and handiwork of true women are more appropriately seen in the Hall of Domestic Arts, than associated with a show of fast horses on the race track.'' In a neighboring State in the fifties these contests of the ''fairer sex'' were defended as socially expedient on the ground that if women were to ride through the crowded streets of cities ''they must become adepts in the art, or they become liable to many accidents''.

During this period the problem of policing the grounds was not onerous. With rare exceptions the early exhibitions were orderly and circumspect in every way. People came for a serious purpose and the rowdy and predatory elements were not in evidence. Outside vendors and showmen, not directly under the jurisdiction of the management, at times created some disturbance, but they were later suppressed or regulated. During the entire three days

of the fair in 1856, "not the slightest disturbance occurred on the grounds. All was harmony and good order, except that at one time, after the gray horse from Dubuque was ruled out, for running for money, the people, with whom he was a universal favorite, demanded his admission to the course, and for some time stopped all business by clamorous shouts for 'the gray!' 'the gray!' — even threatening to 'tear things to pieces' if their sovereign will was not complied with."

The lack of disorder and friction on the grounds was attributed not only to the "moral character of our people" but to the tact and efficiency of the marshals and their assistants. There was certainly no highhanded interference with "personal liberty". At a board meeting during the fair at Keokuk in 1874, a director "reported a contumacious negro, the negro hostler of one of the exhibitors, and moved that he be ejected from the grounds, and forbidden to enter them again." The motion was duly carried and, after this due process, "the Chief Marshal was authorized to execute the order at once".

When attendance at the fair mounted to more than ten thousand the problem of housing accommodations became rather acute. "Let every man bring his blanket or buffalo robe, and then in case he can do no better, he has a bed of his own", suggested the secretary in 1856. Two years later farmers were advised to bring their families and stock, their wagons and tents, and plenty of provisions, "and camp

out both on the way and at the Fair". A considerable number of the "very best ladies in the State" who attended the fair in Oskaloosa "were not inside of a house from the time they left home till they returned".

Special arrangements were made for campers at the Dubuque fair in 1863. The camping ground was near the river, "in a good, healthy location", and a "trusty guard" was paid by the society, "to look after it and preserve order" both day and night. "Do not be afraid to bring your wives and daughters", urged the secretary. "Parties having ladies in company will receive special consideration from the Superintendent of the camp." Solicitude for the ladies seemed to be a prevalent characteristic of managers of the early fairs. At Cedar Rapids in 1872 a "ladies' saloon" was listed as one of the conveniences.

Hotels usually conformed to regular published rates, but occasionally exorbitant charges were reported. One Muscatine hotel "did extort by charging a dollar for a bed", which, in the opinion of Secretary Wallace, deserved "as severe reprehension as any of the indignant occupants of the miserable 'straw beds' may feel inclined to give it."

During this formative period the policy of low membership and concession fees, with an unduly generous complimentary list, made normal revenues inadequate and these were rendered uncertain by unfavorable weather and by periods of depression,

such as that of 'fifty-seven and 'sixty-one. State aid, therefore, was essential to the regular functioning of the fairs. From 1856 to 1872, $2000 was appropriated annually and the State Agricultural Society thus became a semi-public institution. That these subventions made manifold returns to the State there is abundant evidence.

In the transformation of middle western agriculture, the effects of which were felt on the "Middle Border" before the seventies, the fair, State and local, had an effective part. These exhibitions took the lead as agencies in the improvement of live stock, in the dissemination of information regarding new varieties of plants and better methods of cultivation, in the stimulation of the invention and the extension of the use of new machinery, and in the advertisement of the products and the productive possibilities of the State.

By 1860, under the influence of effective private leadership joined with public aid, Iowa fairs, both State and local, were becoming well established. The secretary reported in 1858 that each of the five State exhibitions had been an improvement in some respects upon its predecessors. The following report stated that it was "now nearly as much to be expected that each county will have her Agricultural Society as that she will have a municipal organization".

The Civil War at the beginning had an unsettling effect upon the State fair; but, unlike the situation

in neighboring Commonwealths, did not seriously hamper its work or check its progress. In 1861 the Johnson County fair grounds at Iowa City, upon which the State fair was scheduled, was the site of Camp Fremont and was occupied by a volunteer company until within three days of the fair. "Military necessity" had led to the destruction or disarrangement of a large part of the equipment. In Indiana, Wisconsin, and Minnesota similar use of fair grounds for army camps had led to the suspension of the expositions, and there was much sentiment for that course in Iowa. The directors, however, resolved to "carry on" as best they could. The attendance was small and drastic curtailment of expenditures was necessary. The president explained the situation to the successful exhibitors and they agreed to accept fifty per cent of the premiums. Directors' expenses were paid only for the annual meeting, the annual reports for 1861 and 1862 were bound together, and the secretary's salary and expense account was cut to $700 — "a less salary than the Secretary of any State Society in the whole West." The military spirit was reflected in the patrolling of the grounds by a company of the First Iowa Volunteers. At the other fairs during the war visiting military companies were among the notable features.

In 1862 Iowa, Ohio, and Indiana held the only State fairs in the Northwest. The Iowa exhibition at Dubuque was highly successful. Stock exhibits

were never before equalled and the attendance was sufficient to leave a comfortable balance in the treasury. The secretary was able to make the gratifying report that the society had never before paid so large a percentage of its funds in premiums and that it was "in every sense of the word in a flourishing condition". The "agricultural boom" that came to Iowa in the sixties insured the success of its State fair.

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