The First Iowa State Fair

The first State fair of Iowa, held at Fairfield, October 25–27, 1854, offered as great a contrast to a present day exhibition of the same name as Iowa of 1854 differed from the modern Commonwealth. Grounds and equipment were meager and simple. The report of the committee on arrangements was eloquent of the lingering frontier.

They had "procured six acres . . . and enclosed the same with a substantial straight rail fence, ten feet high . . . erected a shed on the north side of the enclosure, two hundred and fifty feet in length and twenty feet in width, with a table under the same, the full length of the shed, and about five feet wide . . . erected stalls upon all sides of the enclosure . . . built about sixty rail pens . . . made a track in the enclosure, 1500 feet in length and twenty feet wide, with a substantial rope guard around the same, leaving a space around said track from thirty to one hundred and fifty feet in width for visitors . . . erected an office for the board of managers . . . and a stand in the center of the enclosure for the speakers, chief marshal, and committees".

The total expenditure for staging this State-wide exhibition was about three hundred and twenty dollars. To economize space in the limited enclosure,

no horses "attached to any vehicle whatever" were to be admitted except for judging purposes. The grounds were policed by a "chief marshal and five assistant marshals, and a number of policemen", who were made conspicuous by wearing "a blue sash around the body."

Transportation was still in the primitive stage. "They came on foot, on horseback or in two-wheeled carts, jogging along behind slow-moving, ponderous oxen." A favorite means of conveyance was the covered wagon in which the family might camp on the road and at the fair. From outlying regions appeared hardy frontiersmen with long pistols stuck in their belts, both for protection and ornament. The dashing young bloods of '54 — with high-mettled steeds instead of high-powered sport cars — were probably more self-conscious and certainly more envied than their modern type.

Considering limitations of travel and sparseness of settlement, the attendance, variously estimated from 7000 to 10,000 on the "bid day", was remarkably good. "For several days before the Fair," commented a local paper, "strangers commenced pouring into Fairfield by scores; the day before the Fair commenced they came by hundreds; and on the first and second days of the Fair they crowded in by thousands. Such a concourse of people never before assembled in Iowa. Every portion of the State was represented; and all seemed deeply interested in this first great organized struggle of the agricul-

tural interests of Iowa." Local accommodations were taxed to the utmost to provide for such an unprecedented throng. "Arriving early in the morning of the first day," a visitor recounted, "we found every avenue of the town crowded with people, horses, and every manner of vehicle, and all the hotels crowded to overflowing. The good citizens of the place, however, determined to make themselves equal to the emergency, lost no time in providing comfortable quarters for the rapidly ingathering comers, so that by noon every man upon the ground knew where to find an excellent 'eating and sleeping place'."

The leading entertainment feature for this large and representative gathering, and the one that, to judge from contemporary and reminiscent accounts, made the greatest impression upon the spectators, was the exhibition of horseback riding by women, or, to use the official designation, "female equestrianism". Ten such performers, distinguished by varicolored ribbons, competed for a "lady's superior gold hunting watch," offered by President Clagett in response to an appeal which his "gallantry could not allow to go unanswered." According to the elaborate rules of the contest, each lady in order of number accompanied by her "cavalier" was to "ride once round the circle, when the cavalier will retire to the center, keeping within convenient distance of the lady to render any service she may require." The lady was then to ride four times about

the circle at any speed she might choose. And finally the contestants, accompanied by their cavaliers, would "have leave to make the circuit of the ring six times at a gait not exceeding that of an easy canter."

The Lady of the Barred Red Ribbon, Miss Maria Minton, was the first to enter the lists. She was a "fair rider, but unfavorably mounted". And then, "mounted upon a magnificant blood bay, all action and full of power and spirit", came the Lady of the Broad Blue Ribbon — Miss Eliza Jane Hodges of Iowa City, a little girl, only thirteen years old. Under "the instinctive tact" of his mistress, the dashing charger was made to "keep the track and gauge his gait to suit the rider's pleasure." From a headlong gallop at the start, Miss Hodges brought her mount to a trot, from which he rose to a canter, then to a "lively charge", and finally performed his "prettiest tricks" which were "fearfully swift but evidently suited himself and his fearless rider". "A long, loud shout greeted the daring little equestrian as she completed her last round and wheeled with the rapidity of lightning from the course."

Quite in contrast was Miss Belle Turner of Keokuk, the Lady of the Pink Ribbon. "An easy, self-possessed, and graceful rider", finely mounted, she "showed consummate skill in the management of her horse". Her "elegant form, fine face, and soft blue eyes also rather seemed to heighten the effect than otherwise."

Miss Louise Parks, the Lady of the White Ribbon, proved to be a "handsome rider, full of courage, and well accomplished in the management of reins and whip." The Lady of the Yellow Ribbon, Mrs. Ann Eckert, attracted "universal admiration" by her perfect riding, but unfortunately "her horse, though a fine one, was not gaited for such an occasion." Mrs. Green, the Lady of the Barred Green Ribbon, was likewise badly mounted, but she "rode like a queen", spirited, graceful, and confident. Everybody was on the side of Miss Kate Pope, the Lady of the Light Blue Ribbon, "and about the same majority against her horse." She appeared to be an "all-fired fine young lady, full of life, full of spirit, full of fun, and full of ambition".

The eighth contestant was Miss Emma Porter, "a lovely little miss of fifteen", who wore the white and green ribbon. Tastefully arrayed, beautifully mounted, and gracefully natural, she won general applause and commendation. Two sisters, H. and Cynthia Ball, rode last. They were both much admired — the one for her skill and self-possession, and the other for her modest though fearless manner. But their performance was marred by steeds that were too tame and otherwise unfavorable.

In response to a "universal desire" the exhibition of female equestrianism was repeated the next day with much the same results. Miss Hodges, the popular favorite, went through "the most dashing, terrific and perfectly dare-devil performance ever

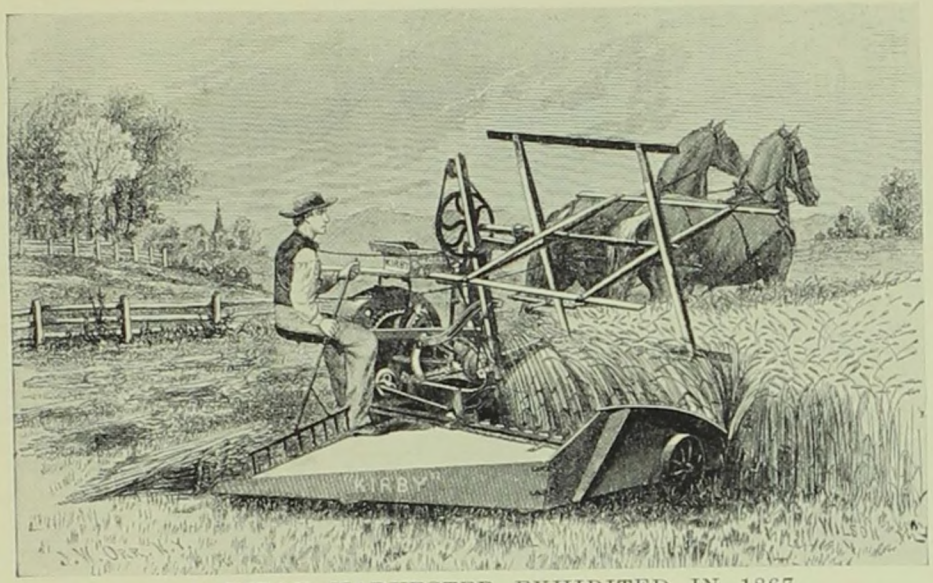
witnessed on horseback. The scene was thrilling, fearful, magnificent. The boldest held their breath as, mounted on her proud and untameable charger, she flew around the course with the rapidity of lightning and with the sweeping force of a whirlwind, and all this with a childlike smile upon her countenance and her whip in full play, thus imparting to all a more than half assurance that the daring little rider was equal to the emergency and abundantly able to take care of herself. At the completion of the fourth round, and still at full and fearful speed, she wheeled gloriously from the track, and was greeted with an earthquake of cheers as she brought in her bounding animal to a graceful halt in front of the committee's stand."

This daring example "excited a lively ambition among all the ribbons". Their riding was more spirited and "much more pleasing" than on the first day. Each seemed determined to prove herself worthy of the prize. When the last round had been accomplished all the ladies with their cavaliers reined up before the judges, and the prize was awarded to the Lady of the Pink Ribbon, Miss Belle Turner, whose gracefulness rendered insignificant what she may have lacked in boldness. But the decision of the judges was not in accord with the opinion of the spectators, who were determined that the Iowa City girl, she of the Broad Blue Ribbon, should not go unrewarded. "Spontaneously, and as if by concert, men sprang up in all quarters of the

field, and in less than five minutes'' a hundred and sixty-five dollars were contributed, for the ''poor and unlettered'' child, together with provisions for her attendance, ''free of all charge, for three terms at the Female Seminary'' at Fairfield and one term at the embryo college at Mount Pleasant. A reporter who had been ''spell-bound and overwhelmed at the daring exhibition of the little favorite, was reconciled to the judges' decision by the ''sober, second thought'' which ''teaches us, as it must all, that if we would encourage a tasteful, correct, and lady-like school of female equestrianism, such as we should be willing our misses and daughters should imitate, the decision of the Committee was based upon correct grounds.''

On the first day, as ''a sort of side affair, and not connected legitimately with the fair proper'', Lee County admirers presented Governor Grimes an enormous ''Denmark cheese'' weighing three hundred and sixty pounds. James B. Howell made an ''appropriate speech'' of presentation ''to which the Governor-elect responded in his usual felicitous manner.''

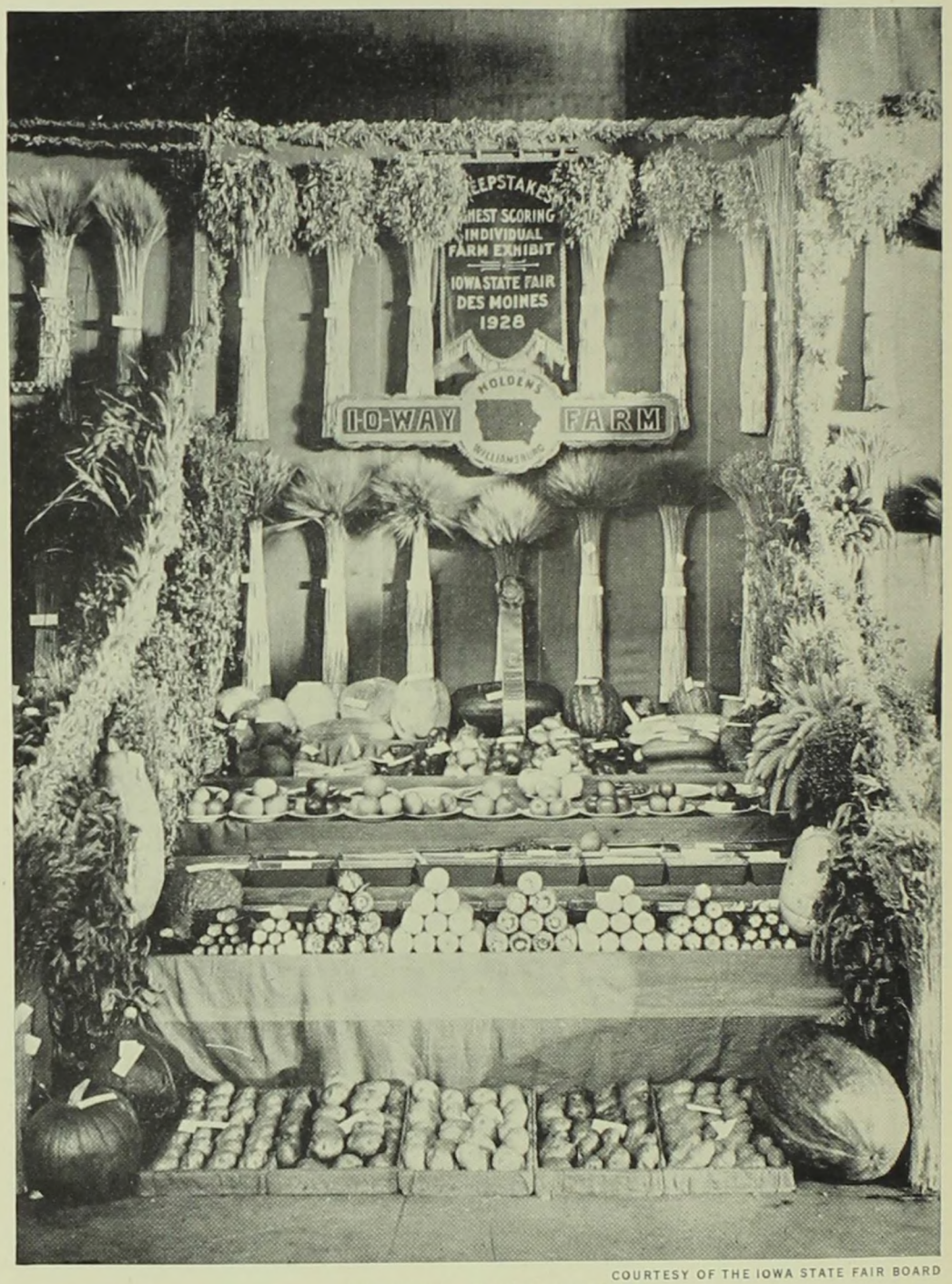
In general, however, the exhibition was serious in tone and instructive in content from the address of Attorney George C. Dixon, which required over an hour for delivery and twenty-five pages for printing, to the judging of exhibits. For the period, the showing of stock and grains seems to have been most commendable. In the not wholly critical judgment



A KIRBY HARVESTER EXHIBITED IN 1867
FIVE HUNDRED AND FIFTY WERE SOLD IN IOWA THAT YEAR



A MARSH HARVESTER EXHIBITED IN 1867
TWO HUNDRED WERE SOLD IN IOWA THAT YEAR



COURTESY OF THE IOWA STATE FAIR BOARD

A TYPICAL FARM EXHIBIT

of a local reporter, "there were many animals" that would "attract attention at any State Fair in the Union." Durham cattle outnumbered all other kinds of fine stock, while no less than one hundred head of thoroughbred and light horses were exhibited. Due partly to the difficulties of transportation, there were only eleven entries of swine, which was regretted because "the raising of swine is a source of immense revenue to the farmers of Iowa."

The editor of the Fairfield *Ledger* thought that some specimens of wheat were "superior", while "as to corn it is useless to talk of finding any better. One sample of oats was the best we ever saw." In the grain yield competition, Hezekiah Fagan of Polk County won first prize for the best five acres of Indian corn with a production of one hundred and thirty-nine and one-half bushels, shelled, to the acre! The prize fall wheat yield was twenty-six bushels per acre, while H. G. and J. Stuart of Lee County raised sixty-six bushels of spring wheat on two acres.

The implement display included "plows, harrows, corn-planters, reapers, threshing machines, fanning mills, corn crushers, and, in fact, nearly everything that the farmer could wish for" — but in many cases could not obtain as the article was not yet produced for the market. Atkin's Self Raker and Reaper attracted particular attention as one of the greatest improvements exhibited.

Prison-made goods were in evidence. The warden

of the penitentiary took the prize for the "best collection of agricultural implements" which "consisted of hoes, rakes, forks, scythes, snaths, &c., all of superior material and workmanship."

The miscellaneous class had such varied exhibits as a "monochromatic painting", "a floral painting", "a collection of snakes", "best paper hanging", "a fur hat", and a "new style of artificial teeth", ingeniously devised "for restoring the natural contour of the face". Secretary Shaffer brought his museum which contained a curious assortment of more than a hundred varieties of snakes and lizards preserved in alcohol. A Dubuque photographer showed some remarkable "mezzographs" or daguerreotypes on paper. Having copied a person's countenance he could make "any number of pictures without the person having to sit for them."

Lingering pioneer conditions were evidenced in premiums for such entries as "team of oxen, not less than three yoke", native or "dunghill" fowl, ox yoke, and grain cradle.

The most unsatisfactory aspect of this first State exhibition was the inadequate financial returns. The receipts, after excluding "about fifty dollars of counterfeit, or otherwise worthless money" was insufficient to pay expenses, so the generous and enthusiastic president of the State Agricultural Society made up the deficit. Financially the outlook was not bright but officials and friends, after the enthusiasm and enterprise manifested in the first exhibi-

tion, had high hopes of the future. "We have, therefore," the treasurer's report concluded, "no tangible means for the progress of the next Fair; but, trusting to the energy and enterprise of our farmers and mechanics; trusting to the diligence of the committee to memorialize our next legislature, and trusting to the zeal and industry of the officers of the Society, we promise abundant aid; and we insure to all a Fair in 1855 far superior in all respects to that which has just passed."

EARLE D. ROSS