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# The Fair in Transition

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## The Fair in Transition

For the past half century the State fair, like every other feature of our agriculture, has been in continual readjustment and transition — passing from pioneer conditions to those of the modern business age. New methods and equipment have been revolutionizing production; organization has encouraged coöperative activity; while Federal and State activities in education, experimentation, and regulation have put farming more and more on a scientific, up-to-date basis. The fair no longer has the field to itself; it must find and keep its place in the “new agriculture”.

Most immediately pressing have been problems concerned with material growth and the consequent financial obligations. If the fair was to be abreast of the times it had to be staged in a big way and this took money which during most of the period was hard to get.

To function adequately the Iowa State Fair had to have a permanent home, with ample space and elaborate, specialized equipment. By the end of the seventies railroad development and hotel and other accommodations suggested the centrally located capital city as the natural abode of the annual exhibition. The fair moved to Des Moines in 1879 and remained there, but it took six years to persuade the

legislature to appropriate the purchase money for a home. There were many who still believed that the fair should continue to migrate in order to secure adequate support. But the prevailing view was that the time had come for concentrating agricultural interests of the State at a central point.

There were social as well as economic interests involved. As James Wilson pointed out in 1881, "one of the most valuable effects of the State Fair is the fraternizing, humanizing consequences of bringing our people together. Local self-government, as we enjoy it in Iowa, depends upon the education of the heart as well as the head. No one meets and mingles with twenty thousand Iowa men, women, and children on the fair grounds — the only place where they can be brought together — without growth of sympathy. Class feeling vanishes when people get acquainted. The training of creeds yields to the broader influence of human brotherhood. Sectional feeling retreats from before the presence of the State assembled. Party prejudice hides, when Iowa people shake hands on the fair ground. The State Fair is to us what Mecca is to the Mohammedan, what Jerusalem was to the Crusader, what Paris is to pleasure seekers."

Finally in 1884 the legislature appropriated \$50,000 for the purchase of a location on condition that the city of Des Moines raise an equal sum for improvements. The new grounds were dedicated on September 7, 1886, with addresses by Peter Melendy,

Governor Larrabee, C. F. Clarkson, J. B. Grinnell, and George G. Wright. Iowa was not behind her neighbors in taking this important step. Only one State fair in the Northwest secured a permanent location before the eighties and several waited until the next decade.

This new establishment, essential as it was for the continuing progress of the fair, involved a heavy financial burden during the period of agricultural depression. The fair, like all other activities dependent upon rural support, was hard hit by the cycle of falling prices culminating in the panic of 1893. A combination of poor crops, bad weather, and hard times ruined the fair in 1894 and only specific guarantees from the city made it possible to open the gates the next fall. Uncertain weather was an increasingly risky element with so large an investment at stake. "World fairs" and other special expositions, which came all too frequently in this period, tended to have an unfavorable effect upon the attendance of the State fair, as well as to set unduly high and unsound standards of exhibits and amusements.

Urban patrons, to whom the fair appealed more and more, were somewhat fickle in their support and demanded high priced attractions which often did not make compensating returns. In 1893 citizens of Des Moines contributed ten thousand dollars to secure a display of Pain's fireworks representing the "Fall of Pompeii" — a spectacle which has since

become a standard feature of the State fair program.

State aid was needed as never before, both for temporary relief and permanent improvements. In 1873 the annual subvention was reduced to \$1000 and after 1878 it was dropped entirely because the legislature thought the fair should be a self-sustaining enterprise. The State Fair Board felt otherwise; all through the lean years it was urging continued and increased State appropriations. In 1875 a memorial to the law makers set forth the services that the society was rendering to Iowa agriculture and asked for \$5000 a year. An indebtedness of \$6500 in 1878 was held to be due to the withdrawal of essential aid, and \$2500 yearly was mentioned as the smallest measure of support that would enable the fair to go forward properly. The secretary suggested that candidates for the legislature be pledged accordingly. All in vain — the society and its great exhibition was left to shift for itself, with the result that by the nadir of hard times in 1894 the indebtedness reached \$25,000. At that juncture the legislature came forward with a partial salvage fund of \$20,000. It was claimed at this time that, of the nine or ten States comprising the Western State Fair Association, Iowa was the only one that did not receive appropriations ranging from \$3000 to \$10,000 annually.

During the early years of the new century the State fair, like all other institutions, had its share in "Our New Prosperity". From 1902 to 1908,

\$357,700 was expended for "permanent improvements", of which \$198,700 came directly from fair receipts and \$159,000 from the legislature. Even so, new buildings and equipment did not keep pace with expanding activities, for in the report of 1908 the secretary enumerated ten building projects of immediate need.

The new age brought not only an expanded and systematized financial program but a modernized method of control. In 1900 the State Agricultural Society was superseded by a Board of Agriculture which, among its other duties, directed the fair. The paid secretary continued to be the real managing head. Finally in 1923, with the creation of a consolidated State Department of Agriculture, a separate State Fair Board was established composed of the Governor, Secretary of Agriculture, and President of the Agricultural College *ex officio*, and directors from each congressional district selected by an agricultural convention. The secretary remained the technical executive official, in direct charge of the fair.

The integrating trend of the period was shown in the development of coöperating circuits and associations among the State fairs and in the formation of the International Association of Fairs and Expositions in 1894. Inter-regional and State visitation of fair officials became a regular practice, and the transfer of secretarial managers from one organization to another, as from Iowa to Minnesota in

1911, indicated the establishment of a new specially trained profession.

Educational activities showed broader, if not always deeper, ideas and interests. Plowing matches were long since antiquated. Evening discussion meetings had been superseded by more highly developed extension agencies, while the general-inspiration address was no longer desired, either at the State or county fairs. As early as 1864, "Long John" Wentworth of Chicago said, in declining to appear in such a rôle, that he was unable "to compete with the animals" which people chiefly came to see; and, with the multiplying of attractions, exhibitional and amusing, even the most noted speakers were at a disadvantage. Hamlin Garland was sadly disillusioned as the official "Speaker of the Day" at a county fair at Osage. It was a real tribute to any speaker who could keep a sizeable audience from the midway and the race track, as did T. DeWitt Talmage in 1889 and Carrie Chapman Catt two years later.

In the eighties the lengthening of the fair beyond a week made necessary a special Sunday program. A sermon by a pulpit celebrity — often imported from outside the State — with a special musical program seemed the most fitting solution. Liberati's band "charmed" an unusually large audience in 1906 "by really the best band music ever heard in Des Moines." But the crescendo of musical entertainment was reached in 1927 when Sousa's famous

band attracted the largest Sunday crowd in the history of the exposition.

In general the State fair found its chief instructional opportunity in serving as an exhibitional clearing-house for the various agricultural agencies, Federal and State. The stock-judging, which continued to hold its basic position, was made more scientific by the substitution of expert judges for the old amateur committees. Students from the Agricultural College at Ames engaged in stock-judging contests, and farmers were taught the technique of appraising different breeds of cattle, horses, hogs, sheep, and poultry.

On the borderline between exhibition and pure amusement was horse racing which became an established institution before 1900. But its triumph was not without long-continued protest from those who felt that this sporting feature had no proper place in the agricultural exhibit of a middle western State, that it was distracting, expensive, and tended inevitably to jockeying and gambling.

Defenders maintained that the development of the race horse was a legitimate and essential branch of stock breeding and that the exhibition of these qualities was as appropriate as any others. Furthermore racing made such a unique appeal that it was essential in maintaining adequate patronage, particularly from the cities. As early as 1881, James Wilson asserted that "the trotting horse pays his way and is almost the only thing that does. Whether

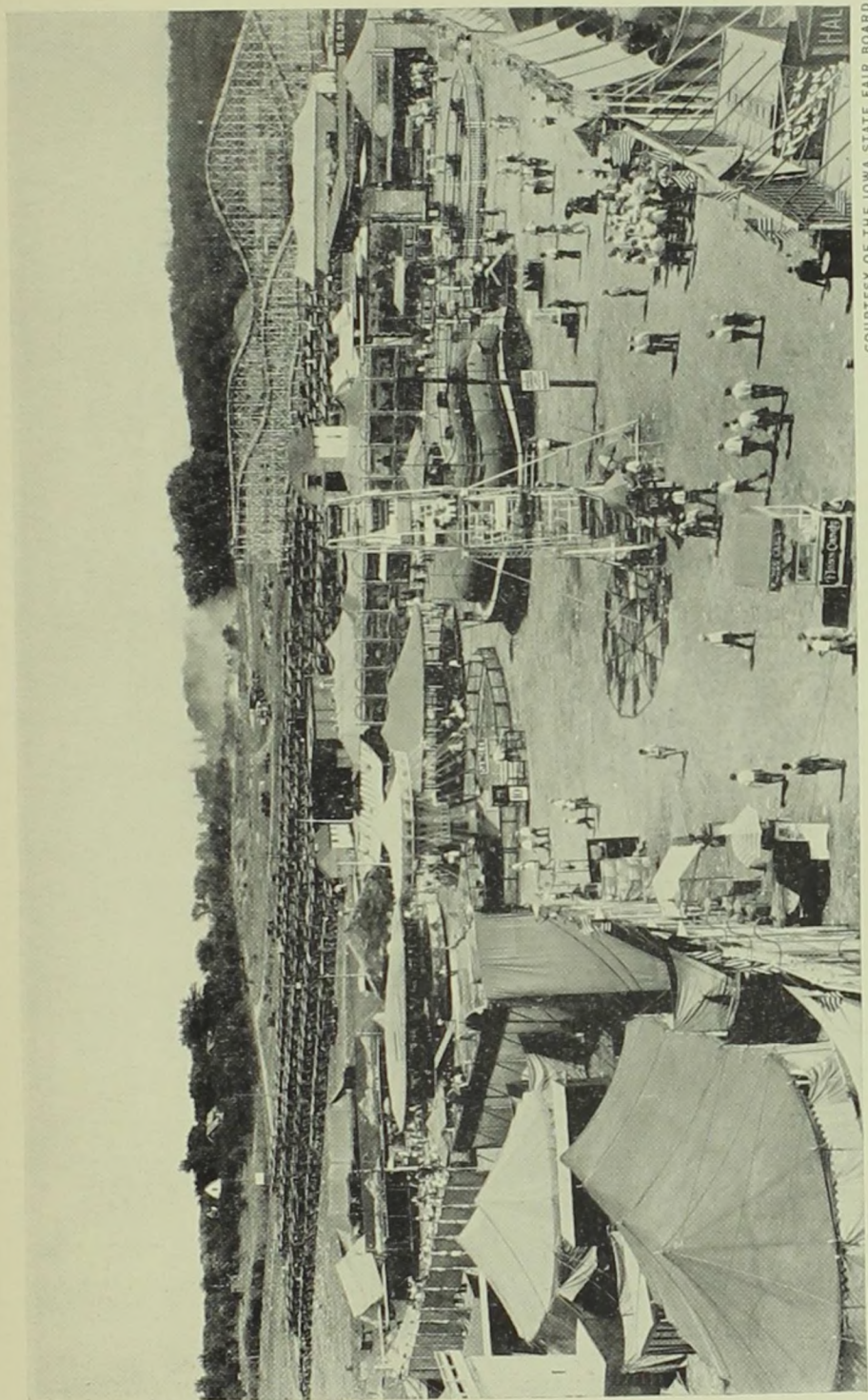


the State Fair would be a success without speeding is to be tried. It is a fact that thousands come, pay their fee, and go straight to the amphitheatre to see the trots, without whose fees premiums could not be paid to other classes.”

The overwhelming demand for this ever-attendant if not essential part of the State fair on the part of the supporting constituency broke down all opposition. This Corn Belt fair, like the others, joined the racing circuits and bid for the fullest and fastest cards. Abuses had to be suppressed from time to time, but the race track became as much a part of the fair as the judging pavilion — and usually far better patronized.

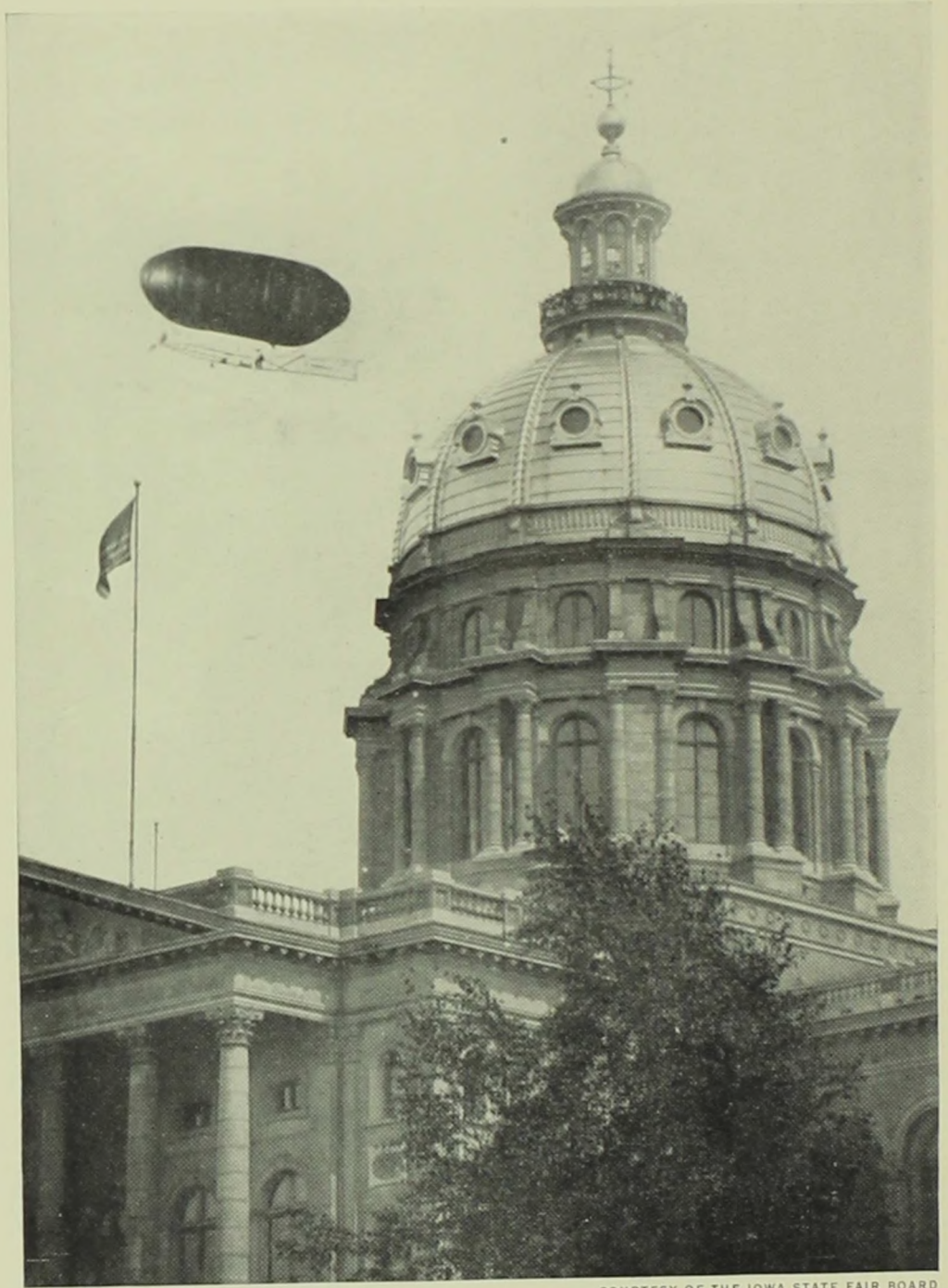
The general amusement problem, ever changing and expanding, could not be solved so definitely. There was an even greater progression in the development of amusement than of instruction. In the era of the “rise of national sport” and of highly developed mechanical devices for amusement, public taste was exacting, if not always discriminating. The “Midway” with its Ferris wheel, roller coaster, merry-go-round, and other hilarious and enticing instruments for the promotion of fun has become one of the indigenous parts of the fair.

World champion race horses have been hired for princely sums to race against time. The famous Axtel was exhibited in a specially constructed glass stall. In 1904 Dan Patch set a record of 2:06, but this mark was outdistanced in 1918 when Single G



COURTESY OF THE IOWA STATE FAIR BOARD

THE "MIDWAY" IN 1926



COURTESY OF THE IOWA STATE FAIR BOARD

FLYING AROUND THE STATE CAPITOL DOME IN 1906

paced a mile on the half-mile dirt track in the world-record time of 2:01.

Competing for favor with the fast horses were bicycle and automobile races. During the early nineties, when cycling was fashionable, bicycle races formed a prominent part of the sporting program. In 1895 there were two days of bicycle racing under the management of the Des Moines Wheel Club. Probably the two mile professional race, "wheeled off in 5:45 by F. Marty of Creston", was the most exciting event on the program.

Balloon ascensions with both single and double leaps and, during the first decade of the new century, aeronautical demonstrations brought a thrill, before spectators had become over-sophisticated. In 1906 "men refused to believe their eyes and children stood in amazement" while an airship "winged its flight from the State fair grounds to the Capitol and back again." The ship consisted of a dirigible-shaped gas bag below which a five horse power engine was suspended in a triangular bamboo frame. As the craft ascended the "music ceased and even the ubiquitous peanut fiend stilled his voice. There was a rush to points of vantage and the craning of necks set in. The ship gracefully but slowly mounted in the air, at times seeming to stand almost on end as the operator headed its nose in the air, while the whirling ten foot screw in front drew the great gas bag up into the atmosphere. When a height of about 200 feet was reached the operator

moved along the triangle to secure an even balance of the machine and then it moved toward the west, whence the operation of the rudder directed." At the Capitol the aviator "alighted on the sward" to let the engine cool, and then twice circling the gilded dome he returned to the fair grounds where the "ship settled to the ground as gently as a cooing dove".

This was so successful that a return engagement was scheduled for the following year, but after one short flight the airship was destroyed during a severe storm. It was not until 1911 that heavier-than-air craft were demonstrated at the State fair. In that year two Wright biplanes were flown each day. Ten years later Ruth Law thrilled the fair crowds by transferring from an automobile to an airplane in flight and in 1927 the fair was visited by both Lindbergh and Chamberlin fresh from their conquests of the Atlantic.

Even in the nineties spectacular acts of the circus and hippodrome were introduced between heats of races and as evening attractions. High diving horses, wire walking, and feats of marksmanship were common. In 1895 a sham battle was fought between Ames cadets and two companies of the Iowa National Guard. This form of excitement did not meet universal approval, however. In a petition to the directors of the fair, the W. C. T. U. objected because sham battles "are not in harmony with the true spirit of Christian civilization, but are corrupt-

ing and demoralizing to the youth and young men of the state and that they hinder the growth of that spirit of peace and amity among the people and among nations which is the duty of every lover of his race to strengthen and promote." The petition was referred to the incoming board of directors.

Bizarre stunts such as locomotive collisions, dangerous sport like auto polo, amusing dog-cart races, old-fashioned fiddling contests, horse-shoe pitching tournaments for both men and women, and hog-calling competition all were employed to beguile additional patrons to the State fair. To attract the city crowd in the evening, the destruction of Pompeii, the burning of Manila, the sieges of Moscow and Port Arthur, the destruction of Tokyo, mystic China, Rome under Nero, and the fall of Troy were reenacted in modern pyrotechnics. This year the "Fall of Pompeii" is to be revived in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of that original spectacle in fireworks.

All of these attractions, however subject to question as to emphasis and appropriateness, were above board morally. But as much can not be said of certain other features, characteristic of the period, which at times eluded the concessions committee. Most prominent of these questionable or wholly objectionable excrescences were games of chance, lewd side shows and carnivals, and the sale of intoxicants. All of the fairs and exhibitions of the country had these evils to contend with, but on the whole the

Iowa fair was relatively clean. "Gambling of every nature and form, as also beer, ale, wine, or other intoxicating liquors, will be excluded from and about the fair grounds", was a regular announcement of the directors. The overwhelming sentiment of the true constituency of the fair was against anything in the great exhibit of the State that tended to be discreditable.

Long before the end of the first quarter of the present century it was evident that the old cattle show, like the pioneer agriculture which it represented, had been relegated to the historical museum. Here and there, to be sure, a voice was raised for restoring the old-time fair in all of its simplicity of purpose and austerity of conduct. Thus, at the dedication of the new grounds, the pioneer leader, Josiah B. Grinnell, registered his protest against the innovations, good and bad alike: "I would bar the gates forever to gamblers, jockeys, whiskey vendors and oleomargarine frauds, and leave reptilian monsters, with acrobats, pigmies, and fat women to the showman, Barnum. Then write over your portals, dedicated to art, animal industry and agriculture". But such voices, insofar as they suggested a narrowing of the constructive, progressive trends, were of the past.

Before the Iowa State Fair had passed its golden anniversary in 1904, the complaint was prevalent that certain State fairs, especially in the East, were becoming great sporting meets, catering mainly to

city crowds and thus failing to perform their true function of representing and furthering the interests of agriculture. Such a criticism could not have been made at any time of the Iowa fair which has been truly agricultural throughout the seventy-five years of its existence, in purpose, organization, and achievement, and has, in its various stages, represented most intimately the life and progress of the heart of the Corn Belt.

EARLE D. ROSS