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# Origin of the State Fair

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## Origin of the State Fair

The agricultural fair, as it is known in this country, is a peculiarly American product. It is in no way related to the Old World market fair, which provided one of the main agencies of trade in the Middle Ages, continued to flourish through the eighteenth century, and still survives among the institutional anachronisms of Russia.

Modelled at the beginning somewhat upon the English cattle show, the American "fair" in its combination of exhibit, instruction, and amusement developed along different lines. As a permanent and distinctive institution it dates from the promotive effort of Elkanah Watson, who included among his numerous services for American agriculture that of being the "father of the agricultural fair". After founding his Berkshire society for the holding of cattle shows, this tireless "agricultural missionary" helped to secure similar institutions, not only in New England but in States as far west as Ohio. Local fairs were started in the Old Northwest during the twenties, and State organizations were launched and fairs held between 1849 and 1853. Far away California, not to be outdone in anything, even at this early day, had unofficial State fairs from 1851 to 1853, though the regular organization was not formed until the next year.



So to progressively-minded Hawkeyes it may well have seemed high time that their State should join the better farming procession. The initial move was made by the Jefferson County Agricultural Society at its annual meeting in October, 1853, when a call was issued for a State convention at Fairfield the coming December, composed of delegates from the various county societies, to form a State organization and provide for a fair. The facts as set forth in the circular were both a justification and an exhortation.

“There is no free State in the Union save Iowa, in which there is not a State Agricultural Society . . . Is it not time for the farmers of Iowa to be aroused to the importance of such an organization in this State? Shall we be laggards in the race of improvement? Shall the resources of other States be developed, their wealth increased and their people elevated in the scale of intellectual being, and ours stand still?

“Farmers are not the only persons interested in this subject. Every citizen of the State has a deep interest in her prosperity and reputation.” Large delegations of “farmers, mechanics, merchants and professional men” were expected at the convention. “Come up gentlemen and do your duty to yourselves and to the State.”

In spite of such an inclusive and appealing invitation the attendance at that historic gathering was disappointing. There were only fifteen delegates



from five counties — Henry, Van Buren, Wapello, Jefferson, and Lee. Governor-elect James W. Grimes wrote that the meeting should go ahead and organize if not more than two were on hand and this the faithful few proceeded to do. The constitution was based upon that of Illinois and, in the apologetic phrase of one of its drafters, “though abounding in imperfections” was as good “as could have been expected considering the hastiness of its preparation.” Following the election of officers a committee was named to petition the legislature “for the passage of a bill rendering pecuniary aid to the furtherance of a permanent establishment of a State Agricultural Society in this State.” At the close of the convention, the fifteen delegates became the charter members of the Society.

The convention decided appropriately that the first annual fair should be held at Fairfield, October 25–27, 1854, and in February the new president, Judge Thomas W. Clagett, sent out an urgent appeal for memberships to provide the preliminary funds. “Nowhere in this Union does the farmer enjoy greater natural advantages than in Iowa; notwithstanding we too often see a want of the application of science and well regulated labor to the development of this most important interest in the State. Experience has proven that the best and surest mode of bringing agriculture to a high state of perfection, is by stimulating emulation among farmers, by annual fairs, and the awarding of



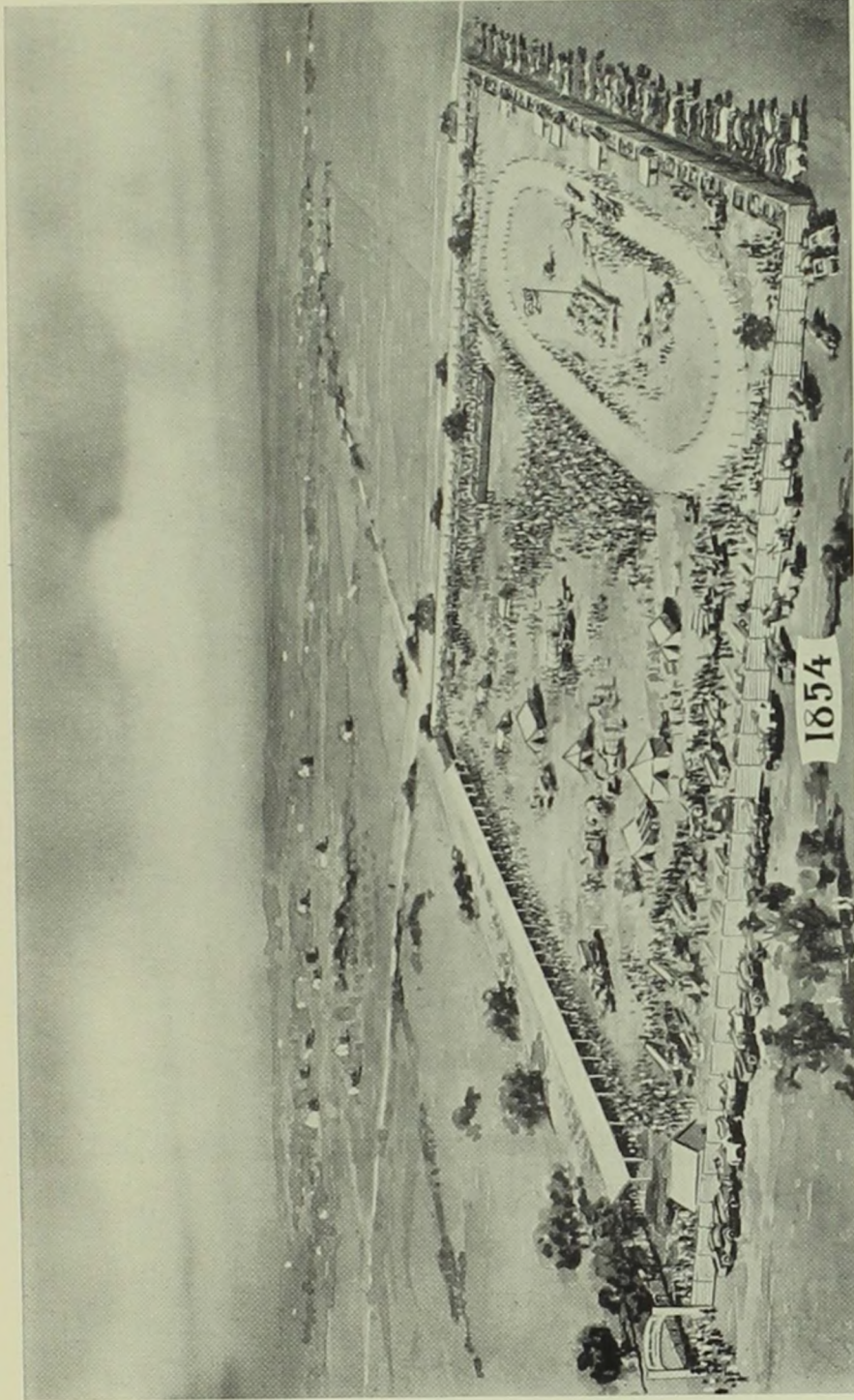
premiums to meritorious exertion." He besought the farmers not to allow this beneficent undertaking to fail for lack of financial support. "I hope you take too much pride in your profession to suffer so great a *disgrace to fall upon you.*"

Two months later the secretary issued a call for a meeting of the board in June to make arrangements for the fair and invited suggestions for their use in making up the premium list. Few such suggestions came in, however, and the list was finally taken from that of the Pennsylvania society. Some four hundred items were included with premiums totaling more than \$1100, a reasonably generous provision "in view of the fact that the board had no assurance that a single dollar would be collected aside from their individual exertions to raise subscription fees."

It now remained only for the president to issue an appeal through the *Iowa Farmer and Horticulturist* for the fullest support in attendance and in the exhibition of all available products, and for the local committee, without funds and upon its own responsibility, to prepare the exhibition grounds.

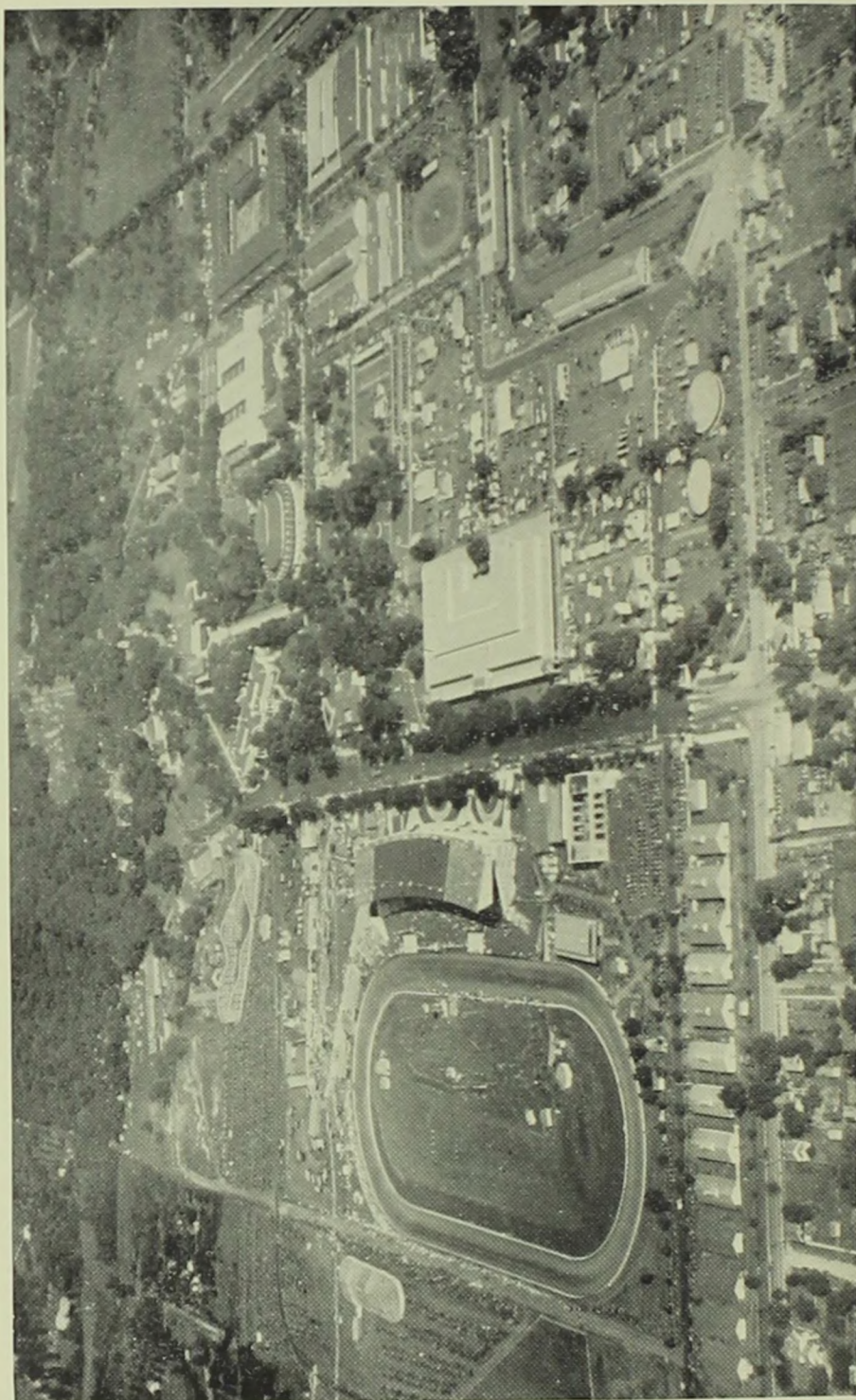
The launching of this, like all other enterprises of common interest, depended largely upon the efforts of a small group of public-spirited, far-visioned individuals. Most prominent of the "founding fathers" were Christian Slagle, Dr. J. M. Shaffer, Peter Huyett, and Caleb Baldwin. Forty years later, Peter Melendy declared, "I knew all of the





COURTESY OF THE IOWA STATE FAIR BOARD  
AN ARTIST'S SKETCH OF THE FIRST IOWA STATE FAIR GROUNDS AT FAIRFIELD





COURTESY OF THE IOWA STATE FAIR BOARD

AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE STATE FAIR GROUNDS IN 1928



early fathers, pioneers of our Society. They were men calculated to promote the welfare of any institution or interest." The general interest in the new institution for promoting the State's basic industry was shown in the distribution of occupations among the first officials. According to an approximate classification of later years, the president was a lawyer and journalist, the vice-president, a merchant, the recording secretary, a physician, the corresponding secretary, a lawyer, the treasurer, a merchant; while on the board of managers there were eleven farmers, three nurserymen, three doctors, three merchants, one carpenter, one banker, one hotel-keeper, four lawyers, three educators, four politicians, and four whose occupation is unknown.

Among the presidents of the pioneer period were such prominent figures as Judge Thomas W. Claggett, Judge George G. Wright, Peter Melendy, and Colonel John Scott. During the formative years the Society was especially fortunate in its secretaries to whom the success of fairs and other activities was largely due. Of the first forty years, John H. Wallace served seven, J. M. Shaffer, thirteen, and his successor, J. R. Shaffer, twenty. In ability, faithfulness, and general efficiency these men ranked in the forefront of the agricultural leaders of their day.

EARLE D. ROSS