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# A Dynamic Quarter Century

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## A Dynamic Quarter Century

In the quarter century between the diamond and centennial anniversaries of the State Fair, Iowa economy and society experienced the greatest stress and strain, alternating from devastating catastrophe to unexampled attainments, of any period since the first Hawkeye Prairie was broken and the first trading center located. These years witnessed the culmination of agricultural deflation and of industrial and financial inflation in the Great Depression, of gradual stimulated recovery, and the insatiable demands of total war on a global scale. Hastened by such emergent involvements, technology in all lines reached unimagined heights. On the farm scientific processes and methods were progressively applied to all aspects of cultivation and husbandry along with a mechanization of all of the operations of farm and home.

Typical Iowa manufacturers, engaged largely in processing agricultural products or in providing equipment for the farmer and his family, reached stabilized localization and national standing.

At the same time improved highways, motorization, air transit, radio, and television facilitated movement and communication of goods, people, and ideas.

Modern business organizations and methods, in appropriate forms, were applied alike to farm, factory, and utility.

The verified findings of Federal and State research agencies were carried to the farms and the industries by systematic extension services. The 4-H clubs gave inspiring incentive to country youth and the Future Farmers of America motivated vocational instruction at the secondary level.

Social changes were reflected in the functionalizing of the public schools in instruction and community services, in the creation of community junior colleges, and in the social emphasis of the churches and fraternal organizations.

As Iowa came of age in this period there was a growing consciousness of state and local scenery, history, folkways, literature, and art. Such appreciation was stimulated and often directly promoted by such organizations as the State Historical Society of Iowa and the local groups which it helped to nourish, the State Department of History and Archives, the State Conservation Commission, the Izaak Walton League, the patriotic societies, the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, and varied fraternal organizations. A succession of anniversaries of the State, localities, and institutions gave incentives for special observances.

All of these evidences of the economically and socially maturing Commonwealth found annually reflection and appropriate recognition in the great

agricultural-industrial exhibition known as the Iowa State Fair.

*Deflation And Depression Years*

*The Diamond Jubilee Fair* of 1929 was a fitting recognition and demonstration of the agricultural and industrial changes and achievements of three quarters of a century. While still decidedly at a disparity with other interests, farmers had made a partial recovery and were hopeful of the program of the new administration. Most other businesses, in spite of ominous signs, were still confident of a continuing boom. The weather was ideal and the extending highway improvement facilitated travel, and camping space was enlarged to accommodate some 25,000.

To give proper observance to such an auspicious occasion the State Fair Board had the full cooperation of the historical societies, the colleges, farmers and industrial organizations, and of many other state and local organizations. The result was a banner fair breaking all previous records in attendance, financial returns, and the extent and attractiveness of exhibits.

The livestock of the million dollar parade, and the overflowing riches of field, orchard, and garden all reached new heights in extent and excellence.

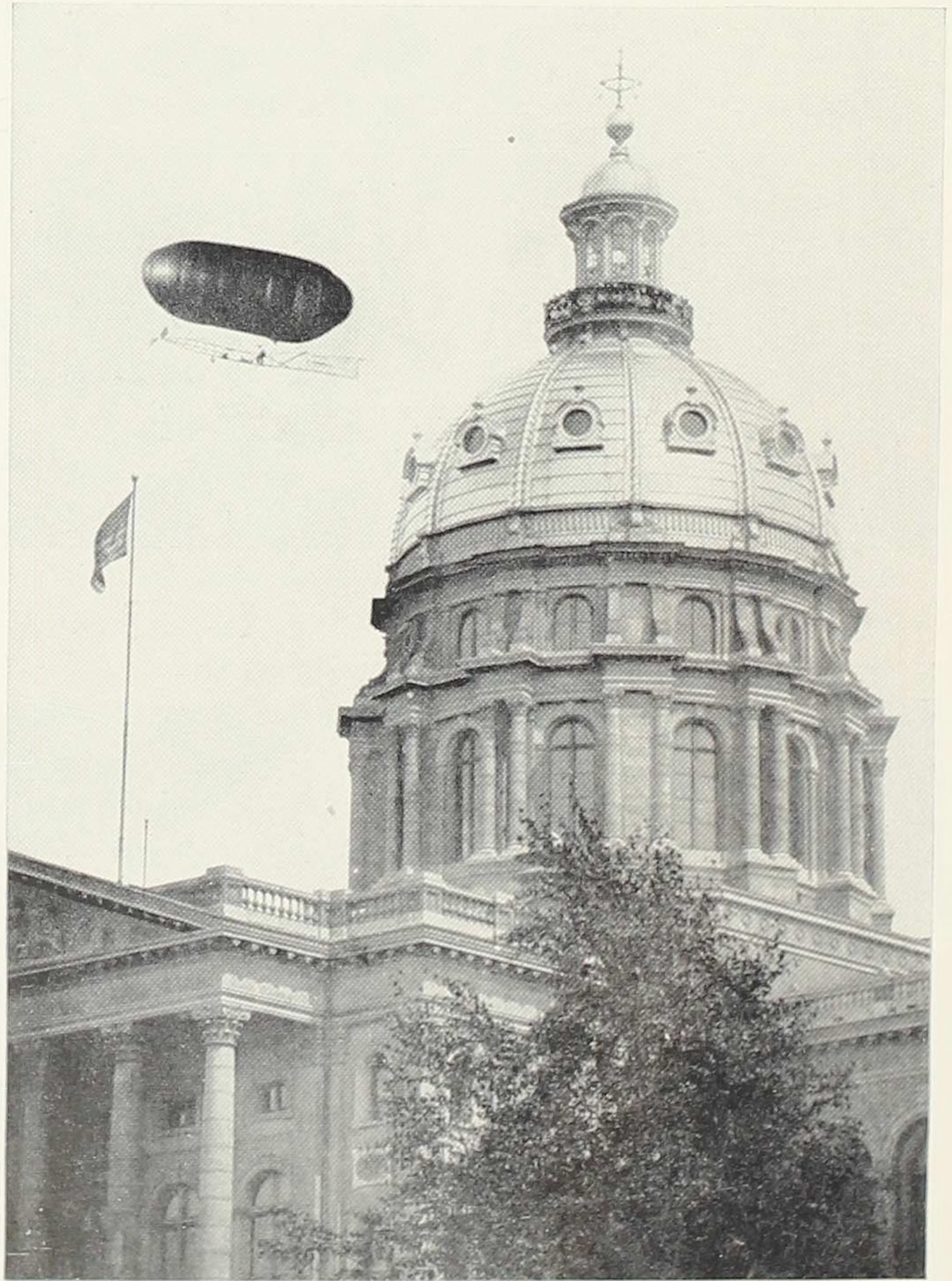
Each department by material survivals or models traced the record from the primitive to the



A Proud Exhibitor and His Prizewinner



One Of The Many 4-H Club Exhibits



FLYING AROUND THE STATE CAPITOL DOME IN 1906

present. The machinery depiction of the stages of cultivation and harvesting was of especial interest. But no less arresting was the elaborate pageant of transportation from ox-cart to the latest models of streamlining.

Household changes appeared in the period equipment, furnishings, and costumes. Historical plays and pageantry turned back the years for varied themes.

Directly in the spirit of the occasion, the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce reproduced the first State Fair even to the presentation of the big cheese. Adjoining this central feature was a restoration of the birthplace of the first native Iowa President, with his first teacher proudly doing the honors.

In sharp contrast the passing scene and pressing interests were recognized in the first annual radio show and by an address, on Farm Bureau Day, by a member of the Federal Farm Board.

The jubilee fair celebrated marvelous attainments since the elementary trials of the pioneer days, but far greater trials and tests were soon to be experienced. Within a few weeks the spirit of confidence in continuing industrial boom and the prospect of increasing agricultural improvement was to be violently reversed by the stock market crash and the devastating business prostration. For Iowa and the Corn Belt generally the nadir of desperation was reached in the winter of 1932-33, although recovery in the succeeding years was but

gradual and somewhat intermittent. Destructive droughts especially in 1930, 1934, and 1936 added to losses and uncertainties.

The return to the bizarre spectacle of a locomotive smash-up at the 1932 "thrill day" as a desperate means of drawing spectators was ironically symbolic of the state of the economy. The iron horse thus sped on its final journey must have been salvaged from a rolling stock graveyard as funds for mere entertainment were reduced to the minimum for a state exhibition.

With sharply reduced attendance and consequent loss of revenues, the Board reduced expenditures for both operation and upkeep to the bare essentials. In spite of such drastic economies, small deficits were accumulated in the three years, 1931, 1932, and 1934, the first to be recorded since 1914.

Reduction in number and variety of exhibits and attractions by no means involved a lowering of standards. Livestock and agricultural showings that survived for the ring or booth were truly of the fittest. Depression adjustment revived interest in draft horses. At the same time machinery exhibits were materially curtailed. Interest was in implements of immediate utilization, such as the general purpose tractor.

With the curtailment of outside attractions, the state's own resources of entertainment and instruction were drawn upon to the advantage of the true



values of such an exhibition. Schools, colleges, clubs, the State extension services, and the Federal works agencies, all responding valiantly, more than filled the void. A unique feature of the 1932 exhibit was the filming of Phil Stong's "State Fair".

The depression gatherings, for those able to attend, gave opportunity for the discussion of grievances and the interchange of plans and suggestions for organizational and governmental relief. Politicians and journalists found here the truest sounding board of rural opinion. Undoubtedly political as well as economic and social history was made in these informal forums.

From the fair of 1933 the gradual improvement in farming and in the outlook for the future of the occupation was reflected in an increase in attendance, exhibits, and net return. With the perfecting of lighting and pyrotechnic facilities the night shows drew increasingly large city audiences.

The temporary "recession" of 1938 was not in evidence in the exhibition of that year; on the contrary the *Territorial Centennial* gave the theme and incentive for another banner fair. The centennial commission had scheduled the fair as the climactic event, and in preparation the historical consciousness and exhibitional experiences of previous anniversaries could be utilized. Consequently the Board in cooperating with the historical societies, schools, clubs and W.P.A. writers and artists

was enabled to present a realistic and colorful depiction of a century of Iowahood to a near record audience. The evening showing of the historical pageant, the "Calvacade of Iowa," was particularly impressive. The regular agricultural and mechanical exhibits equaled or surpassed the old standards. Such a graphic showing of past difficulties overcome and of achievements made was a good omen of the recovery and future advance of the State's economy.

#### *Recovery And Global War*

With the continuing recovery in the fateful years 1939-41, the Fair gained recognition as an exhibition of state, regional, and national standing. In 1939 its National Livestock Show "attracted more horses, cattle, swine, and sheep than had ever before been assembled on the fairgrounds." In 1941 Lloyd B. Cunningham succeeded the veteran Arthur R. Corey in the secretaryship. Mr. Cunningham was a prominent farm leader of Howard County who had been president of his county Farm Bureau and an active and alert director of the State Fair Board. The highly successful fair of that year was a good augury for the new administration and for the future of the exhibitions. Tragically this, like all other servicing institutions, was to be checked suddenly in normal functioning by the world cataclysm.

At the fairs of 1939-41 the defense and pre-

paredness theme had been emphasized in decorations and with artillery and air exhibits and demonstrations, and at their annual meeting at the beginning of 1942 the Board planned to make the campaign for food production the central feature for that year. Early in the spring, however, the Army Air Corps requested the use of the fireproof buildings for the storage of air equipment and, for a token rental, such an agreement was made for the duration. There was still the possibility of limited war-time exhibits. The unoccupied buildings, the grandstand and the track were available. As a stimulus to youth participation in the war effort, it was proposed to hold a 4-H club state-wide demonstration. Plans for such a junior fair were nearly complete when an appeal came from Washington to cancel all state-wide gatherings in the interest of conservation of tires and gasoline. The Board promptly suspended all exhibitions for the war years. This was only the second time that a fair had been cancelled; the previous omission was in the Spanish-American War when the grounds were used for encampment purposes.

Local fairs continued with loyal support as did the state agricultural conventions and the meetings of the fair managers association. So the exhibitional function was maintained at the local level and the Board directly aided the cause as custodian of vital war equipment.

The renewal of the State's great harvest festival

and exhibition came most appropriately in the centennial year of statehood. While farms, cars, highways, fairgrounds, and all other private and public equipment and establishments showed the strain and drain of the war exertion, there was a spontaneous drawing to this material and symbolic panorama of peace and plenty. Crowds rushed in and about regardless of weather. For the first time the attendance rose above the half million mark, putting Iowa in the top bracket. The resulting impressive surplus was hardly adequate to provide repairs, replacements, and necessitated expansion of buildings and equipment. Livestock exhibits were inevitably depleted but of high quality. School and club exhibits indicated husbandry and the practical arts had not languished. On every hand were evidences of a Commonwealth come of age — materially and culturally.

#### *Fin De Siecle*

In the closing years of its first century the Iowa State Fair reflects all of the "big changes" that have wrought the present high economy and advanced and complex society. The plant occupying nearly four hundred acres with an investment of well over \$3 million is equipped to provide the best in entertainment along with exhibits that reveal the triumphs of technology in cultivation, husbandry, and domestic science. The increasing emphasis given to 4-H and F.F.A. competition is

significantly characteristic of present-day trends.

Modern transportation has made the exhibitions truly state-wide. To accommodate the largest number, provide a partial hedge against bad weather, and utilize more fully the large investment the period has been extended since 1951 to ten full days.

The latest exhibition (that of 1953) illustrates the great variety of attractions provided by intermingling the old-time proven interests with the most recent. Thus, sheep shearing and team pulling contests, horseshoe pitching tournaments, fiddling and checker competition were scheduled along with stock car races, baton twirling, quiz derbys, and jet plane demonstrations. The old-time Sunday morning Bible schools and worship services were still popular as were the variety of special-gathering days.

Thus, while seeking to preserve the best in past practices and traditions, this public serving institution is pointing the way to future achievement.

Institutions like material remains are always in danger of becoming antiquated and anachronistic as Dr. Holmes reminded:

Little of all we value here  
Wakes on the morn of its hundreth year  
Without both feeling and looking queer.

The Iowa State Fair as it nears its one hundreth birthday certainly has no feeling or appearance of being queer. On the contrary it is one of the most

up-to-the-moment of institutions. The enduring strength of the Corn Belt economy and society has always been in its ability to adapt and adjust to changing needs and demands, and this outstanding representative of its servicing agencies has manifested a rare facility for keeping in the vanguard of the passing scene.

EARLE D. ROSS