

County Fairs: Competition, Critters and Community

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This week Kathleen writes about county fair season.

ALMA - "I haven't seen you in at least 20 years," the rural Etrick women exclaimed as she shook the older man's hand. "Catching up with friends is a great part of the county fair," she leaned over and told me.

It's county fair-time.

Walking through the fairgrounds I see the efforts of many volunteers. Thousands of hours go into preparing for the fair. Preparations for this year began shortly after last year's fair concluded.

Young people compete for fair premiums, blue ribbons and trophies. Their preparation begins in the selection of projects, generally through 4H and FFA. Detailed records are kept of animal's production. Young animals are taught to lead. Youngsters learn the proper way to show. Parents encourage, prod and persevere through the stressful last weeks of preparation.

Oldsters get into the action thinking of quilts, preserves, crops or tractors to show.

Volunteer boards run most county fairs. Every member of the board is a strong contributor to the operation of the fair. Every detail of building maintenance, entertainment, purchase of supplies,

vendor contracts, and fair booth preparation gets scrutinized by the fair board volunteers.

County fairs have a deep tradition in our state. Wisconsin's first county fair was held in Waukesha County back in 1842. This fair was held before Wisconsin was even a state! At that fair a handful of exhibitors showed their agricultural exhibits. A total of \$40 was awarded to exhibitors. Now Wisconsin has 76 state-aided fairs every year. Seventy-one of Wisconsin's 72 hold county fairs. Five of those counties also host a district fair.

The old agricultural expositions, as they were sometimes called, became a place for city folks to meet country dwellers and for farmers to compete against each other. Fairs helped grow the dairy industry. They also became a time for farmers to learn the latest in agriculture techniques and compete against each other in categories from quilts to corn.

Everyone looked forward to Fair Day.

Youngsters arrive by the carload, carefully carrying their projects. Family, friends or adult leaders help unload the cattle and kids take them to the wash rack for a cold bath.

Horses are bathed and polished. Teens saddle up and head to the exercise ring to work off nervous energy. Over and over again youngsters ride through the pattern their horse will perform. The youth strive to win the best time, take home a trophy and a small premium check.

Sheep, lamas, swine, goats, fowl, rabbits, cats and dogs are among the myriad of animals that compete for awards.

But the fair is about more than clean critters and competition. It's about community.

It's time to catch up with relatives, friends and neighbors. Grandparents share stories of their children. And the tradition continues as their children remind their own offspring in a way that sounds strangely like something that parent heard as a child.

Generations of youngsters grew up with 4H. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the 4H program nationwide. Like the first county fairs, 4H started with a focus on farming. Today the organization is much more than crops and livestock. Rural and city youth alike participate in a wide spectrum of programs that teach them important life skills. Technology is providing new opportunities for youth.

Digital photography, computer and web categories are bringing in a whole new group of technology driven exhibitors.

4H will continue strong into its second 100 years because of the contributions of so many adults who teach generations of youngsters. Recently I attended 4H leadership awards where we celebrated a gentleman who gave 60 years of leadership to youth in 4H.

The volunteers serving on the fair board, in the booths, as livestock supervisors, 4H leaders, parents, grandparents and adult mentors come together to create a fair experience youngsters remember forever.

The fair creates the spirit of community that nurtures the soul and encourages the young person to say, "I want to raise my family here."

Hats off to all the volunteers who make this year's fairs the best ever.

If you haven't had your fill of fairs, the Jackson, Buffalo and Pierce County Fairs are coming up. And don't forget Wisconsin's premier State Fair!

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