

County Fairs: Time for Creativity and Critters, Friends and Family

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August is a time for all of us to step back from politics and enjoy the world around us. So this week Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the annual tradition of the county fairs and shares details about what she saw and heard at them.

ALMA, WI - "We were working on a peach pie at 11:00 pm last night," a 4-H mom whispered. "We were working on brownies at 2:00 am," said another mom who overheard the conversation.

We were outside the 4-H food judging at the Pepin County Fair. You could have heard a pin drop inside the room as the judges sampled the entries. "What a great job," I thought. "Dessert judge at the county fair."

County fairs have a deep tradition in our state. Thousands of families, FFA members, 4-Hers and other youth poured their time, energy, talent and creativity into projects exhibited at Wisconsin's many county fairs.

"Did you see the chicken made of egg shells?" the superintendent of crafts and woodworking at the Trempealeau County Fair asked as I walked through the craft building. He led me over to the top prizewinners on special display.

Indeed, there was a chicken made of broken brown eggshells. Each flawlessly placed shell piece matched the shade and shape of the shells around it and covered the perfectly shaped

chicken.

“How did she get the beak to fit together?” I wondered out loud. “It’s a Styrofoam mold underneath that she carved,” the superintendent explained. I very much admired her amazingly detailed work.

“Over here,” the superintendent showed me the woodworking and mechanical-type entries. Beautiful hardwood tables were finished to a shine. He showed me an incredibly large doghouse, complete with shingles and a gutter system that filled up the dog’s water bowl - ingenious.

“His dad helped him design and build the house,” the superintendent said. “How did he transport it?” I asked. “It’s got wheels. He just rolled it in.”

“Transport problems? You ought to see this.” He led me over to the mechanical toys. In the corner was a huge contraption. It is hard to describe the contraption except that it was over five feet tall and had what looked like lots of Ferris wheels connected to each other with all kinds of other mechanisms attached.

“It really works,” the superintendent told me. “The young man who built it had it running for the judge. But you should have seen the family get it here. Dad drove the truck with the trailer and the young man and grandpa held it steady in the trailer.”

I marveled at the complexity of this mechanistic wonder - gears, flags, wheels, and poles – very small, intricate mechanical parts.

Amazing work was also done by youth showing cattle, pigs, horses, sheep, rabbits, chickens, and llamas.

At the Eau Claire County Youth Fair, the beef judge complemented the 4th through 6th graders

that bravely led market weight steers and full-grown cows.

“This youngster has been in the show ring all day,” said the judge. “She’s doing a marvelous job with that steer. He goes where she wants and he’s 12 times her size.”

Fairs are also a great way to catch up with your neighbors and extended family. All the relatives come out to see the youngsters show; and neighbors provide a friendly rivalry whether it is with the cattle or the corn.

I enjoy the fairs for so many reasons. One reason is the relaxed, friendly, rural environment of the fair helps folks more freely share what’s really on their mind.

“Just for the record,” the man at the Jackson County Fair told me “we shouldn’t finance that stadium for the Bucks. The money should have gone into the roads. The Jackson County roads are a mess.”

Indeed. Jackson County is turning some asphalt roads back into gravel. The growing sand mines are adding exponentially more wear and tear to the rural roads.

One man followed me from the Trempealeau County Fair to the Jackson County Fair and finally to the Buffalo County Fair before he caught up with me. “I waited an hour here to see you,” he told me. I was impressed.

Many folks had issues with some form of government they wanted help resolving. That’s good. Others just wanted someone like me to hear their opinions. That’s good too.

Miss me at the fair? I’m headed to Pierce County next. See you there!

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