

## **WARRICK COUNTY FAIR**

**Cincinnati Literary Club**

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**My annual visit to the Clermont County Fair is a step back in time, inspiring memories of my childhood experiences at the Warrick County Fair in Indiana. I learned from John Cobey that he had grown up on a dairy farm and had Fair experiences similar to mine, and then Joe Dehner said that he remembered county fair visits. Together, we thought the theme of county fairs might be worthy of a budget. So, here are our stories.**

**In the 1940's and 1950's, in rural southern Indiana, there was no or little TV and scant few other entertainment options, and the week-long County Fair was the most anticipated summer event. The carnival atmosphere of the midway with food, games, rides, and side-shows was great fun for kids and adults.**

**Families would gather at the Fairground race track where harness horse races were run. The track also provided a place for popular tractor pulls, competitions to determine which farmer's tractor could pull the greatest weight the farthest distance. And, a temporary platform stage could be moved onto the track in front of the grandstand for events. That's where the Fair Queen was crowned and where prizes were awarded for the best looking baby, the ugliest dog, and the best public speaker.**

**But the quintessence of the fair was in the exhibits of agricultural products, livestock, and other projects entered into competition by members of FFA (that's, Future Farmers of America) and 4-H clubs. 4-H alumni among us will remember the pledge which was recited at the beginning of each meeting. I pledge:**

**My head to clearer thinking.**

**My heart to greater loyalty.**

**My hands to larger service.**

**My health to better living, for my club, my community, my country and my world.**

**Participation in 4-H was a significant part of the lives of me and my brother Mike and of other kids in our small town. Shortly before his death two months ago, a childhood friend wrote me: *I just celebrated my 80th Birthday this month, it seems like only yesterday we were in 4-H together or playing sports.***

**Among our father's many pursuits was farming, and he decided early in our lives that we would have no idle time. He and my mother became leaders in 4-H, and Mike and I were kept busy milking a few cows, caring for other farm animals, and tending a corn field and extensive**

vegetable gardens. Our 4-H experience involved many different projects, including forestry, for which we spent hours in the woods learning the importance of trees and how to identify varieties by leaf and bark, and how to make an exhibit of the most perfectly formed leaves. We took New Zealand white rabbits and leghorn chickens to the fair and exhibited garden products – tomatoes, potatoes, and green beans. In order to find the best vegetable specimens, we dug, picked and sorted hundreds of potatoes, bushels of green beans, and crates of tomatoes.

Our principal 4-H focus, though, was on the Guernsey cattle that we raised from calves and took to the fair.

Preparing an animal, particularly a calf, for the county fair is a learning experience for both boy and calf. There remains in my mind a Rockwellian picture of my brother on one end of a lead rope and a calf on the other, both with heels dug in and pulling back as if in a game of tug of war. The calf bawling and the boy yelling words for which he'd get the strap if heard by our father. After a while, we learned that the pull of a small tractor could persuade a calf. The calf had to learn to follow the lead, to stand for a bath and for application of clear nail polish to its hooves, and to get used to the feel of a brush and sound of trimming clippers. There was born of the experience an affinity, a combination of affection and respect, between boy and calf, which enriched the life of each. And, after weeks of practicing the lead and proper stance, the two entered the show ring together, in harmony, the calf perfectly groomed and the boy in his white competition dress.

A special part of the fair experience was to stay overnight with our cattle. How exciting it was to truck the cattle to the Fairgrounds and get them housed in one of the large dairy cattle tents, tethered next to each other on beds of fresh pale yellow straw. And, then to set up the army cots that would be our beds for the week alongside the large storage box which contained our clothes and equipment. Bales of hay and straw and sacks of grain were stacked in a line in the middle of the tent dividing one side from the other, and one breed of cattle from another. The sweet smell of timothy, red clover, and alfalfa hay overrode malodors which drifted from the latrine some distance away. On hot days, large fans at the ends of the tent provided relief from the heat. The cattle lay quietly, content to be in a clean bedded space with a breeze and attended to by the 4-H boys and girls.

It's hard to imagine parents today leaving their children alone overnight at a county fair with traveling fair workers nearby. My parents felt easier about that, I suppose, because Ray Gessner was there overnight as well. We met Ray on our first trip to the fair. He was a large sturdy man who always wore a pressed white shirt, blue overalls, and a brownish creased hat. Ray was Chief Herdsman for the dairy herd of St. Meinrad Archabbey, a Catholic Benedictine monastery in neighboring Dubois County. The black and white purebred Holstein cattle that Ray brought to the fair for the Open competition were magnificent, the best examples of the breed, particularly the mammoth bull, Victor, named for a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Pope.

Ray spoke reverently of and to his cattle, and the cattle responded to Ray's instructions without resistance. "Move over, Victor," he'd say, with his hand on the big bull's rump, and Victor complied. No tugging and pushing, which was often required by others attending cattle down the line. In the show ring, under Ray's command, the cattle moved like royalty, slowly, head up, proud, as if they knew they were representing the Abbey.

In the evening, before lights out, we'd sit with Ray and listen to his stories. He said that when he looked at one of his cows, he could visualize her ancestors who had been under his care. He could recite their names, describe their conformation, and enumerate their achievements in the show ring. If Abbey monks visited the tent, they spoke reverently about Ray and the Abbey herd.

"Don't worry about the boys," he'd say to my parents when they left. "I'll watch them," and he did. He quickly resolved any argument that developed between me and my brother, and if as sometimes happened, an unsavory appearing character came through the tent displaying more than passing interest in us, Ray was quick to move alongside, pitchfork in hand, until the suspicious character left.

My brother and I had a few blue ribbon and champion animals, including Charm, a cow with excellent conformation and disposition, and Frankie, our \$10 bull. Frankie came to be with us after a visit of our family to the Indiana State Fair. We met a young farmer in the cattle barn whose farm was near Franklin, Indiana, a town on our route home and the namesake of Frankie. At the farmer's invitation, we stopped by the farm, and there we saw the few-days-old calf. "I have no use for the calf," the farmer said. "He'll be veal in pretty short order," an unacceptable prospect for me and my brother, and apparently for our father, who bought Frankie on the spot for \$10. To transport the calf, the farmer found a large cardboard box, hogtied Frankie, and put him in the box in the trunk of the car. "Chances are he'll make it," said the farmer. "If not, you're just out \$10." Frankie did make it home although not without loud squalls at each intersection in the small towns along the way.

Frankie was included in our show cattle the following year. He won his class for younger bulls, and for the championship round we discovered that he would compete with a very large more mature bull for which the owner claimed to have paid \$1,000. On contest day, Frankie and the three-times-larger bull paced the show ring before Loren Skelton, a local farmer and experienced cattle judge. After several minutes of study, the decision was announced, and Frankie had won. The owner of the big bull went berserk. "I was cheated!" he shouted. I wanted to believe that Frankie had won fair and square, but I wondered about that after seeing the judge visit my father a few days later about a loan from the small bank of which my father was cashier.

Next to the dairy tent was the beef cattle tent – mostly Black Angus and Hereford. It was in the beef tent that I met Lynnette with whom I was immediately smitten and who became a sort of fair-time girlfriend in the years to come. Her family raised Angus, and her prize steer,

Hamburger, was born on their farm. Lynnette had cared for Hamburger since he was a calf, and now he was a handsome eighteen months old steer. "He weighs nearly twelve hundred pounds," she proudly told me as she brushed his shiny black coat. "He's my baby." It was amazing to see this small girl handle twelve hundred pound Hamburger. "You know, I'm going to lose him," she said as she put her arms around his neck and tears welled in her eyes.

And lose him she did. On the last day of the Fair, I watched as Lynnette led Hamburger first to the weigh scale and then into the show ring for a solo appearance. The grand champion purple ribbon attached to his halter and Lynnette at his side, Hamburger moved confidently around the ring to the applause of the crowd. Lynnette's parents stood proudly at the ring gate. Hamburger nuzzled Lynnette's arm as her lower lip quivered, and a line of tears streamed down her cheeks as the bidding began. The bidders, local insurance agent, real estate agent, banker, and grocer, competed for the advertising plum that came with buying the grand champion market steer. The bidding was raised higher and higher, and a record price was paid, producing a hefty sum for Lynnette's college fund, but at the cost of a broken heart which wouldn't quickly heal. Such was the lot of many of the market livestock - steers, pigs, and sheep - that 4-H or FFA members brought to the Fair.

The end of the fair was bittersweet. My parents would come with fried chicken which we shared with Ray and others from the cattle tents. Sometimes, we'd gather alongside the race track near the top of the home stretch to watch the horses round the far turn and head for the finish line. Each of us had a favorite driver for whom we'd cheer as he brought his horse into position for the dash home. Mine was Harry, owner of Harry's Café, who in his trademark green driving hat and silks was often at the head of the pack. We'd laugh as we listened to the pound of hooves on the dirt and to the shouts of the drivers as they exhorted their horses and threw profanities if they were boxed in or forced wide.

Such a grand, happy time. A simple time. So long ago.