The Fair

YEAR AFTER YEAR, IN THE second week of September the county fair was held. Very often, too, this was the week when corn-cutting should have been started. Getting the corn into shock was regarded as an important job, but few ever allowed it to shut them out altogether from the pleasures of the fair, which was the outstanding event of the year to nearly all in the county and to many in neighboring counties, both ruralites and urbanites.

The fair opened Monday morning and closed Friday night. There were no night sessions for many years; now they are commonplace and popular everywhere. In spite of frowns and protests from some who considered it a desecration of the Sabbath, hundreds of men and boys visited the fairground in Van Wert on Sunday afternoon. They watched concessionaires set up stands and tents. They sized up horses, cattle, and pigs as they trickled in to compete later for prizes. They sat on the board fence surrounding the elliptical racetrack and made jokes as trainers exercised trotters, pacers, or runners; or as local owners of classy horse-and-buggy rigs got on the track for a few rounds in the limelight.
Attendance on Monday was always light; but early on Tuesday, a big trek would begin, horse-drawn vehicles, bicycles, and occasionally pedestrians, moving in on all roads leading to the fairground. As the day advanced, the traffic increased steadily until, toward noon, it might become almost a solid procession. Some families piled into lumbering, springless farm wagons drawn at a walk by stalwart teams of horses, the passengers sitting on boards laid across the wagon box, their feet in hay or straw on the floor. Other families rode in two-seated carriages—nearly all of them with a fringe around the top. Some of these conveyances were drawn by teams of big work horses, some by single, light-footed carriage horses. At times numbers of people from farms and towns miles to the north, south, east, or west came by train.

Young blades, some with their best girls beside them, traveled in buggies whose shiny paint had been newly washed and polished for the big week, their fast-stepping horses well groomed and smartly caparisoned in neat black harness. A few of the ultra-stylish among them drove with white lines. All of these fellows delighted in pulling out of the procession from time to time, passing half a dozen or so slower vehicles and then cutting in where they could continue at a fast pace. To a casual observer it might have appeared that each was bent upon making everyone believe that he was a most important personage, whose time was of priceless value.

Toward evening each day the homeward movement would begin and would continue until after nightfall. The homebound traffic was rarely as heavy as that moving toward the fair at peak periods; the vehicles somehow became more evenly and more thinly distributed. The
grinding of the wheels and the tramp of the horses’ feet
soon reduced top layers of roadways to a fine powder.
Barring rain, this powder, near the end of the week, might
be two or three inches deep over the dirt roads. Through­
out the daylight period and far into the night, a pall of
dust hung thick and heavy over the countryside, settling
upon vehicles, their occupants, the horses, roadside fences,
porches, crops in the fields, and even sifting into houses.

Few farm families ever thought of going to the fair
without a basket dinner. At noon the clan gathered at
the family wagon or carriage, and the edibles, the choicest
of fare in generous quantities, were placed on a tablecloth
spread over the cleanest grassy spot that could be found.
Rarely was the best spot available really clean or ideally
shaded. Dust lay thick everywhere, and bits of paper,
melon rinds, banana peels, and cobs from which horses
had eaten their lunches littered the ground. Swarms of
flies persisted in efforts to get at the food. The ground
was pretty well policed but it was not uncommon for
sneak thieves to raid a farmer's wagon or carriage. Then,
members of the family, coming together for the noon meal,
would be discomfited and chagrined to find basket and
contents gone without a trace.

The best horses, cattle, sheep, hogs, and poultry in the
county were exhibited. There were displays of amazingly
tall corn, excellent wheat and other small grains, tempting
fruits, and perfect vegetables. Schools brought in select
work done by their pupils. Of special interest to women
were needlework, baked goods, jams, jellies, and canned
fruit. Paintings and sketches in various media were dis­
played by local artists. Dealers and salesmen were in
daily attendance, displaying and demonstrating farm ma-
chinery, musical instruments, household appliances, and furniture. All exhibits, each in its particular class, were in competition for prizes.

There was a full program of horse racing every afternoon. The majority of visitors were content to watch at intervals from free vantage points along the fence surrounding the track. Others preferred to pay a quarter a head for seats in the grandstand from which, throughout the afternoon, they had a good view of all parts of the track. Excitement at times reached a high pitch. There was a little betting, but it was on a much smaller scale than has been common in later times.

Daily, inside the track and directly in front of the grandstand, the balloonist and his helpers started inflating the big balloon about midafternoon. The operation was timed so that the ascension would come late in the day, in order that the crowd might be held on the grounds as long as possible. The balloon was supported by a rope stretched between two trees. In the ground, beneath the mouth of the big bag, was a pit in which, after ropes and sandbags had been properly arranged, a fire was kindled. The aeronaut or an assistant fed light wood and kerosene into the flames, using a tin cup to throw in the oil.

When the hot gases had inflated the balloon somewhat and it began to pull noticeably at its moorings, volunteers chosen from bystanders moved in and, gripping it at the bottom hem, held it in place while more oil was thrown into the fire. At last, when it was fully inflated, there was a cry: "Let 'er go!" Men and boys holding the bottom released their grip, the ropes were all slipped free, and the balloon dramatically started skyward. As it rose, the aeronaut, dressed in tights and seated in a trapeze below
the parachute, waved gaily to the spectators. Up soared
the buoyant bag, higher and higher, until it appeared no
larger than an egg and the swaying figure of the man a
mere speck against the sky.

At the proper moment he “cut loose,” and spectators
held their breath until the parachute opened gracefully
and began wafting its passenger gently earthward. Soon
the balloon, weighted at the top, turned bottomside up,
and dark, smoky gases poured from its mouth as from a
volcano. Shortly, it collapsed into a limp rag, then fell
swiftly, streaming and waving like a great dark banner,
trailed by wispy smoke.

One year the ascension was made by a woman who
made beautiful, spectacular flights. The possibilities for
accidents in connection with all those performances were
numerous, but our balloonists all came through unscathed.
Amazingly enough, no trouble ever came from their care­
less handling of kerosene and fire. They always made their
landings on open ground, rarely more than a mile or two
from the point of ascent.

The visitor found at the fair a variety of catchpenny
amusement devices. There was a striking machine with
a wire-guided ball that a brawny customer, armed with
a maul, could send high into the air, the top point of its
flight measured on a painted scale. Several spots could
be found where one might test his skill at throwing base­
balls and maybe win as a prize a cheap black cigar or
two. If one had a yen for pitching wooden rings, he could
readily find a stand where, by very skillful tossing, he
might win a cane, a knife, an umbrella, or even a doll.

Always at a spot where crowds tended to move in
greatest numbers a glib talker stood on a platform with
a supply of buggy whips, making them crack like pistols and exchanging them rapidly for coin of the realm. Not far away one could find other pitchmen at drop-doors of their wagons, vending marvelous Indian cure-all medicines or lines of merchandise, often very gaudy and all of the most doubtful and ephemeral value. On every hand were peripatetic hawkers, setting up a great din in their efforts to attract customers. They offered for sale toy riding whips, gold-washed "jewelry," ice cream, candy, hot dogs, popcorn balls, rubber balloons, squawkers, and even live chameleons. It may well be that descendants of this fair-following gentry have become the hard-sell hucksters and spielers who now contribute so many obnoxious features to radio and television programs.

A merry-go-round and a Ferris wheel ran all day for the entertainment of children, young and old. It is a strange fact that boys and girls appear never to tire of riding these devices. Each crop of youngsters seems to enjoy them fully as much as did their parents, not to mention their grandparents, before them. The carousel's mechanical organ was equipped to play just one currently popular tune. It blared this forth over and over in loud, tinny tones, throughout each day of the fair. As a result, visitors might seem to hear the music hours after they had left the grounds, sometimes several days after the fair had ended.

The midway boasted several tent shows with long-winded barkers, featuring mediocre vaudeville acts, sleight-of-hand performances, wrestling, "world wonders," and freaks—nearly all brazen fakes. Generally, performers and attendants were frowzy individuals of obviously questionable character. One year we saw a show that stood out because it was honest and aboveboard. The performers
were ballyhooed as "Bohemian glass blowers." They may or may not have been actual Bohemians, but they were such skilled artisans that it was both instructive and fascinating to watch them blow glass of many colors, fashioning it into ornaments and trinkets of extraordinary beauty and delicacy.

Everywhere one saw swains walking happily, hand-in-hand with their lady loves, all dressed in their fashionable best, all seeking to make the best possible impression and to cram into each day, each hour, the utmost in pleasure and entertainment. A carnival spirit prevailed, and everyone had a wonderful time, in spite of milling crowds, heat, flies, dust, and feet that ached and burned and throbbed in protest against endless walking and standing.

Year after year, a traveling stock company arranged its schedule to appear at the theater in town nightly during fair week. Usually, a different play was presented each night. The promise from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, painted on the curtain, "... tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything," was rarely made good in full measure. But those who filled the house to see the plays, none too critical of the drama or the Thespian art presented for their edification, found pleasure in the performances, hammy though they were, and enjoyed the music furnished by a local orchestra. For many, a night at the theater rounded out a full day of pleasant, diverting activities, long to be remembered.

To not a few men and boys who, at the end of fair week, had to don overalls and sally forth to cut corn, the toilsome task came as a severe letdown, a painful descent from a plateau of pleasure to a morass of misery.