

A Fresh Look At Nebraska



-Isms

By LuAnn Schindler

This time of year, certain songs remind me of a favorite childhood event.

Country group Lonestar sings, "Down at the county fair, big time, big top, big crowds, big hair. There's nothing bigger all around the country anywhere than the county fair."

And Chris Ledoux swears, "There's a full moon in the western sky, and there's magic in the air. Ain't nothin' I know of, can make you fall in love, like a night at the county fair."

Imagine what the first fair looked like. In 1765, the York, PA, fair kicked off as a two-day show. Although it resembled a farmer's market, the fair expanded into a modern classic.

During the early 1800s, fairs let families experience the newest equipment, livestock, crops, and farm techniques. Towns competed for residents. Why not attract families by hosting an impressive showcase of the land and its uses?

Merchants hosted early agricultural exhibitions, but for the event to succeed, these businessmen relied on area farmers to enter crops and animals for display and judging. Eventually, promoters added horse racing, carnivals, and sideshows to offer something for everyone. Plus, entertainment boosted ticket sales.

Nebraska's unique fairs include the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Expo and the 1909 second National Corn Exposition. Both events drew large crowds to Omaha.

Nebraska's longest running county fair takes place in Aurora in Hamilton County. An agricultural society organized in the county in 1871, and in October 1872, the county fair took place in Orville City, the county seat. The next year, the fair moved to Aurora. The site flip-flopped a few more times, and now, Aurora is its permanent site.

Merriam-Webster defines "county fair" as an event usually held annually at a set location in a county especially to exhibit local agricultural products and livestock. That explanation doesn't provide an accurate description.

To me, the county fair conjures and classifies sights and sounds. It's sensory overload: the whirr of the Tilt-A-Whirl, the hint of manure lingering in the air near livestock barns, displays of photographs, ornate decorated cakes and plates of perfect string beans, hands grasping tightly the safety bar of the Octopus, cotton candy disintegrating on my tongue.

About age 4, my parents and Aunt Joyce took me to the Antelope County Fair, then held in Neligh's Riverside Park. I played some carnival game and won a small figurine of an "English Gentleman." My parents still have my "winnings."

My hometown's fair provided a chance to see friends during summer vacation. Our family spent more time at the Adams and Hall county fairs watching big-name entertainers delight crowds.

As a kid, you fall in love with the fair for its simplicity, the pick-up-a-duck game where everyone's a winner, the dripping sno-cones, the homemade pie stand run by the local church. It is big personalities, bigger burgers, and the biggest rides.

Paradise by the midway lights.

Now, there's still a touch of magic, a full moon against a pink-red sky, and the recollection of uncomplicated times.

And the chance to fall in love again.

Share your favorite county fair memories with LuAnn at <http://luannschindler.com>.