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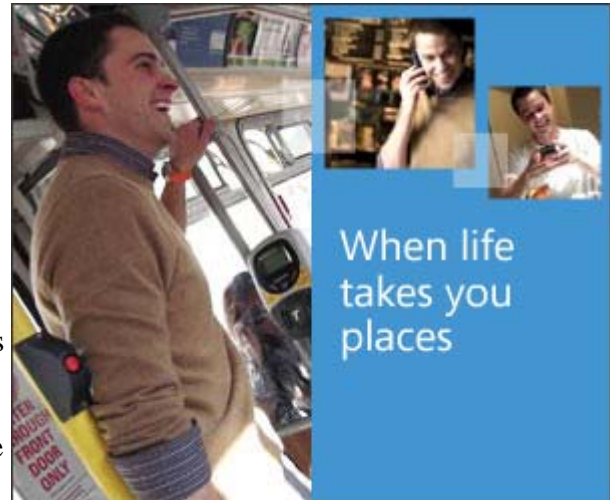
State Fairs: A Summertime Tradition

By PETER MIRES

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My old professor, geographer Fred Kniffen (1900-1993), loved the state fair. Who doesn't? The cacophonous midway, corndogs and funnel cake, and big-name entertainment have considerable appeal. But Kniffen saw the state fair as a celebration of an American tradition: agriculture.

A century ago, when Kniffen was growing up in Michigan and developing an interest in geography, the U.S. population was 60 percent rural and 38 percent of us made a living from farming. (Today, four of five Americans live in cities and only 2 percent are farmers.) State fairs reminded him of his youth, but as a scholar, he examined fairs as part of the cultural landscape.



According to Professor Kniffen, the roots of the American agricultural state fair can be traced to European market fairs, not unlike those celebrated by popular Renaissance festivals, where people congregated after the harvest to buy and sell all manner of produce. Market fairs also attracted a variety of vendors, as well as the ubiquitous traveling shows, acrobats, fortune-tellers and thieves. Market fairs — "to market, to market, to buy a fat pig" — were common in Colonial America, but disappeared after the American Revolution.

Increased industrialization and urbanization created the need for greater commercialization of agriculture. By the early 19th century, regional agricultural societies were advocating methods of scientific farming. The first educational agricultural fair was sponsored by the Berkshire Agricultural Society and held in Pittsfield, Mass., in 1811. The idea spread throughout New England and beyond.

By the mid-19th century, fairs had become both educational and entertaining. The educational component included showcasing diverse agricultural products and domestic arts, livestock judging, organizational booths, lectures and exhibits, and increasingly, the latest machinery and equipment. The entertainment component most often meant a midway and a racetrack. Fair buildings included few permanent structures, although today most fairgrounds have an architectural core.

The Iowa State Fair, one of the country's oldest and most popular fairs, was portrayed in the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical "State Fair." It is also featured in Patricia Schultz's bestseller, "1,000 Places To See Before You Die." Not all states have a state fair, however. Connecticut, for example, continues a tradition of agricultural fairs at the local level, but also participates in the Big E, New England's state fair.

In my home state of Delaware, the first state fair was held in 1920. Its layout, typical of most state fairs, consists of a racetrack, a grandstand and livestock barns on the 30-acre fairgrounds. The Delaware State Fair now attracts more than 300,000 visitors every July.

As a sign of the times, the Delaware legislature in 1996 approved the installation of slot machines at the fairgrounds. Midway Slots, recently renamed Harrington Raceway & Casino, was born. It now operates year-round and generates considerable revenue for state coffers. Although the gaming industry (one of my favorite euphemisms) further erodes the *raison d'être* of the American agricultural fair — its educational function — perhaps this is just the next phase in the evolution of what we call the state fair.

Like Professor Kniffen, I too let the state fair take me back to halcyon days. My grandfather was a large-animal veterinarian, and I used to show horses. I even managed to win a modest collection of ribbons.

Now, when my wife and I go to the Delaware State Fair, we spend most of our time in the barns admiring the animals. I guess we prefer the occasional whinny to the staccato of slots, the smell of manure to that of money. We walk past the kids with 4-H and FFA insignia and are reassured that another generation will feel as we do about the state fair.

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