



.....STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH

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The Franklin, Clay, Nuckolls and Adams County Fairs are history and the Webster County fair has started as I write this column for this week. I have to admit that this time of the year always gets my juices going. Someone asked me at clean-up day if I really enjoyed doing this every year. In thinking over that question I realized that this is my 43rd Webster County Fair as a volunteer, FFA Advisor or Extension Educator. Can that really be? Gosh, those memories come back and I could write a book on all the activities and nuances, but I think a simple narration of some of my thoughts is in line for this week. I have communicated this before, but with us being smack dab in the middle of our fair I thought it good to bring it back.

What's So Good About the County Fair? Forget Ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds and cotton candy. At the County Fair, it's all about "just bein' country." The county fair, harkens back to the good old days when fun meant family, animals and spending time outdoors. The hustle and bustle of daily life is replaced by the cacophony of bleating animals. Men in blue jeans, sweat stained hats and boots gather in the hot sun to talk crops and the bids on cattle, hogs and sheep. Youngsters lounge in the shade of the animal pens, sit on their show boxes or hang on their clipping chutes, discussing how their steers, hogs or sheep fared in showmanship events. Even some bets are made in a good natured way on who is going to come away with the Grand Champion this year, or whose steer will have the best carcass. All part of the scene.

Fairs are a unique summer and harvest celebrations that have been a part of the American scene since the early 1800's. I know there are a lot of people just like me. What is it about this time of year that makes this piece of Americana so alluring and so very special? They're the smells, fresh-cut wheat, kettle corn, barnyard manure, cream-can stew in the 4-H and FFA trailer lot, teenage perfume, and the sweat of laboring contestants - there's a distinct aroma that only fairs and festivals possess. And where else can you find a rodeo, beef, hogs, sheep, rabbits, chickens, and blue-ribbon pickles in one place. Fairs offer something for everyone. Some come for the 4-H yum-yums (Sloppy Joes), others crave the funnel cakes or pie at the Methodist food stand. Many come to watch the 4-H and FFA exhibitors prepare and show their projects which range from static exhibits to livestock, each as important to the exhibitor as it is to the next. Still others come for their annual pilgrimage or family vacation or just for the social networking and visiting old friends and neighbors and attend the rodeo.

Childhood memories lure us back to a fair each year where we admire exhibitor's livestock, bright red tomatoes, sweet corn, cucumbers and youth artwork and pictures. We can get on a daring carnival ride; or eat cotton candy even if it sticks to our face. We can sit at the 4-H snack shack and reminisce. We can even witness the water fight between 4-H and FFA exhibitors, and even 4-H leaders and volunteers that seems to put punctuation on the final day of the fair.

Fairs celebrate rural America, vegetables, farm animals, sewing and home cooking, heritage, photography and hundreds of other wonderful craft or animal husbandry projects. There is something to be said about the smell, the lights and the sounds of a fair. We all like fairs. They are an important part of America and Nebraska and our agricultural culture. The County fair in any part of Nebraska is hardly atypical. These ventures always revolve around agriculture and family bonding. People involved with the 4-H and FFA work really hard to maintain the old-fashioned county fair and atmosphere. There is an effort to do things that people can relate to, but we try to maintain the basics of what life was 25, 50, 75 or even 100 years ago. The Webster County fair, now in its 109th year in Bladen, relies mostly on livestock shows, open and static exhibits, rodeo and even demolition derbies or mud drags for entertainment not unlike many other counties across the nation.

Fair Time Has Arrived, and We're All Loving It. As an old time 4-Her and FFA member, fair time is far more work than I remember as a kid. The 100° days seem hotter, and the snow cones and funnel cakes seem more expensive. The bleacher seats seem harder, the days and the distance between barns seem longer. Nonetheless, I've yet to attend any activity that boasts as much community support, creates so many hours of quality family time, and has a higher percentage of kids who understand the value of competition, sportsmanship, hard work and having fun. I have always said that we have the best livestock and the best kids of anywhere in the country and I still believe that. Yes, things, families, names all change, but we still have the basic core of good hard-working, honest and caring families across the board I have been proud to work with.

Fair time gives dads a chance to really connect with their kids – their efforts focused on helping them achieve their goals. I fondly remember this with my daughter. Meanwhile, the moms just continue what they do all the time -- keep the family together, and sacrifice mightily for their kids. Both sets of grandparents, if able, will be attending to make it all the more enjoyable for the kids, and probably to watch their children experience what they lived through. I bet grandma and grandpa will arrive with the hope of feeling the same sense of pride they felt with their children. Can't you just feel it?

It doesn't really matter what your goals are, or the activity you choose watch or to compete in. There's just something special about melding community, kids, animals, agriculture and fun into an annual event. I consider spending several days at a county fair or even the Nebraska State Fair as a "Right of Passage", a reinforcement of what makes America unique and special. Everywhere you look at the fair you'll see proud dads, super moms, great kids, and the support network of family and community that enables those kids to have an experience of a lifetime. And the neatest thing of all is that it's all in our own backyard. As we enter the lion's share of our fair, I am happy to say - See you at the Webster Count Fair! Enjoy!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or Nebraska Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, Nebraska Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email to: dlienemann2@unl.edu or go to the website at: <http://www.webster.unl.edu/home>