I just got back from the 88th Annual Ak-Sar-Ben Livestock Show. For you that have been there in the past it has changed over the years. It has moved from its old grounds on 72nd Street to its new digs at the CenturyLink Center on 10th Street. The facilities are wonderful as is the air conditioning, along with the filtration of the air. I fondly remember the old Ak-Sar-Ben building which had a certain charm and historic aura about it, including perhaps a slightly moldy aroma. I also remember what we, so not so fondly, called the Ak-Sar-Ben flu. Many of you that had the opportunity to be at the old Ak-Sar-Ben settings would attest to the improvement in air quality that is evident. It did at first seem a bit weird to have animals walking on smooth cement with roofing paper for traction, but I am getting used to it. It is always fun to watch young people compete with their animals because Ak-Sar-Ben is considered the peak for 4-H exhibitors here in Nebraska.

It may interest you that more than 2,000 4-H families, from a ten-state area participate in the Show. Categories of this event are catch-a-calf, dairy, stocker feeder calves, breeding beef, horse, market beef, market broilers, meat goats, market lamb and market swine, rabbit, and dairy steers as well as almost a dozen other entry opportunities including quiz bowl, premier exhibitor and more. States eligible to enter are Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. It was, and still is, under the auspices of the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben. I know our county has benefited, and would bet every county in this state has benefitted from the activities and funding that was made available by this group. I believe that the original 4-H exhibit hall that we renovated in Webster County was built, at least in part, by funding from Ak-Sar-Ben. I think it appropriate this week to take a closer look at Ak-Sar-Ben.

Did you ever wonder how this organization got its start? Well I did, so I did a little research. If you know a little Nebraska State Fair history, you know that it used to be located in Omaha in the early years of our statehood. Let’s go back to 1895. Omaha at that time was the home of the Nebraska State Fair. But the State Fair Board, angry because Omaha businessmen failed to provide suitable evening entertainment for families attending the fair, laid down an ultimatum: "Provide entertainment other than saloons, gambling houses and honky-tonks for the 1895 fair or lose it to a competitively alert Lincoln." If you think of it, Lincoln actually lost the Nebraska State Fair about 7 years ago because Grand Island was more “competitively alert”! It goes to show you that what goes around comes around.

To face the challenge put forward by the State Fair Board, financial needs were first met by Omaha businessmen to provide the needed improvements for the city and the State Fairgrounds, but then, on the evening of March 28, 1895, a meeting was called with 60 of the most prominent businessmen of Omaha in attendance. At this meeting, the 12 men who formed the Executive Committee of the Omaha Business Men's Association (an organization still in existence) and who had taken charge of the festivities of Fair Week presented an ambitious plan for securing all floats which had appeared in February’s New Orleans Mardi Gras Parade for the Omaha fair. These 12 men became the original members of the Board of Governors of the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben. The group traveled to New Orleans with a mission in mind.

They became convinced that a permanent organization like the Mardi Gras Society was just what Omaha needed to add zest to its progressive outlook, complete with "royalty" and "coronations." So on the train ride back from New Orleans, the Omaha delegation decided that they needed to name their new organization. One businessman, Dudley Smith, suggested "Why not reverse the name of our beloved state, since everything seems to be going backwards these days?" Another member suggested that since this group had saved the State Fair for the city, the organization should be called the "Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben." Thus, Ak-Sar-Ben was born in 1895 and on September 19 that same year they held their Mardi Gras style parade and its first coronation ball, based upon the Spanish legend of the Kingdom of Quivira.

The Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben contributed mightily to the effort of keeping the State Fair in Omaha. However, during 1900 the State Legislature moved the Nebraska State Fair to Lincoln regardless of their labors. But Ak-Sar-Ben continued its popular parades (including electric floats), carnivals, annual Royalty coronation and ball. In 1919 Ak-Sar-Ben purchased the 200 acre tract at 63rd & Shirley Streets that had been the State fairgrounds, to build a permanent community center. In 1921 parimutuel wagering was introduced to Nebraska at the new Ak-Sar-Ben racetrack and grandstand. Revenue from the races supported Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben charities and programs through the mid-1980s, including the ball, scholarships and added premiums to the state fair and county fairs as well as stipends to help 4-H across the state. Racing lost its favor and those funds dropped off considerably and races were discontinued in 1996, which changed the landscape for Ak-Sar-Ben.

Of course the Livestock Exhibition has been a big part of Ak-Sar-Ben. The very first Livestock and Horse Show was held November 3, 1928 in the new Coliseum that was built along with some burns one year after a fire destroyed the original Ak-Sar-Ben Den, along with most of the historical records. It stayed pretty much the same until 1966 when they renovated the Coliseum and barns, covering the brick with metal and updating the interior. In 1998 Ak-Sar-Ben supported the development of Qwest Center and in 2002 the old Coliseum was destroyed and the Livestock Show moved the following year to the Qwest Center which now is called the CenturyLink Center. Now called the Ak-Sar-Ben’s River City Rodeo & Stock Show, it is still one of the largest premier youth livestock shows in the Nation …and now you know why!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or UNL Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, UNL 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