

The American State Fair

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we would have somehow avoided the "inhumane preference" of the twentieth century (170). This is a rather stunning conclusion, since neither nationalization, socialism, nor government regulation has proven to produce the "humane" utopia the Populists expected. Technology played a major role in the demise of the small family farm and, with a modified form of capitalism, it has helped improve the lot of both the farmers and the other groups that Clanton believes were totally ignored at the end of the nineteenth century—women and African Americans. *Congressional Populism*, with its methodological overdependence on congressional rhetoric, presents a sympathetic view of congressional Populists, but it also illustrates how wrong the Populists were in many of their "humane" dreams.

The American State Fair, by Derek Nelson. Osceola, WI: MBI Publishing, 1999. 160 pp. Illustrations, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY CHRIS RASMUSSEN, UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

In their heyday, roughly between 1850 and 1950, state fairs were tremendously popular and significant institutions throughout most of the United States. Derek Nelson aptly describes his book as a "tribute to the American state fair" (7) during this century, when fairs simultaneously extolled the virtues of farm life and introduced many rural Americans to technologies, consumer goods, and entertainments that contributed greatly to the countryside's eclipse by an urban, industrial society. *The American State Fair* evocatively describes the extraordinary array of exhibits and entertainments that made fairs an annual microcosm of a state's attainments and the most eagerly anticipated event on many Americans' calendars. The book is organized thematically, and is divided into separate chapters on agricultural contests, midways, racing, carnival rides, freak shows, and other aspects of the fair. Nelson's sprightly prose is perfectly pitched to describe these annual carnivals, and the book's dozens of photographs, postcard views, and advertising posters are delightful and thought provoking. Fairs stimulate all five senses, but are especially a feast for the eyes, and Nelson has assembled a cornucopia of illustrations of midways, contests, and fairground architecture that capture the bustle and gaudiness of a fairground thronged with showpersons, exhibitors, salespersons, and patrons.

Nelson offers an important insight concerning fairs' role when he observes that fairs were always suspended between the past and the future—that is, fairs strove both to venerate the traditions of rural life and to introduce rural Americans to new ideas and technologies.

Because fairs were simultaneously monuments to the past and harbingers of the future, they can tell us a good deal about the farmers, implement dealers, 4-H members, show people, and fairgoers who filled fairgrounds annually. From the historian's perspective, however, Nelson's tribute to fairs is not without its shortcomings, to the extent that its thematic approach slights the importance of both chronology and geography. Nelson understates the considerable changes that transformed fairs—and American life generally—between 1850 and 1950. His claim that "the essential elements of the fair have remained unchanged" is accurate, in that American fairs have always mingled the serious business of education and economic development with festivity. But fairs scarcely remained unchanged throughout this period; they were powerfully affected by the economic and cultural forces that reshaped American society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Beginning in the late nineteenth century many Americans understandably feared that rural life was jeopardized by the astonishing rise of an urban, industrial society. Fairs, among the most significant institutions in rural America, were inescapably affected by this challenge to farm life, and were alternately blamed for exacerbating Americans' dissatisfaction with life in the countryside and hailed as indispensable institutions for preserving the family farm.

Although contemporary fairs still attract enormous crowds and resemble their predecessors in many respects, Nelson reminds us that state fairs were considerably more vital institutions in an era when most Americans had firsthand experience with agriculture and rural life. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the overwhelming majority of Americans live in cities and suburbs, and, as Nelson notes, the rise of the service sector economy has undercut the importance and respect that agriculture once enjoyed. Fairs now seem to gaze wistfully toward the nation's agrarian past, not toward its urban future. In 1900 farm families eagerly awaited the fair because it afforded them a brief respite from the labors of rural life; a century later, Americans tote their children to the fair to allow them to glimpse a rare curiosity—livestock on the hoof.

In addition to covering a century of history, Nelson roams widely over thousands of miles of terrain. *The American State Fair* synthesizes a wide range of information and searches out the common features shared by exhibitions from coast to coast and from the Great Lakes to the Rio Grande. The book is less attentive to local and regional differences that distinguished individual fairs from one another. Because these fairs were created to develop and advertise their state's agricultural bounty, fairs in, say, Massachusetts, Georgia, Minnesota, and

California not only included many similar displays and amusements but also offered exhibits unique to their state. Nelson thus succeeds in depicting "the American state fair," but his broad view of the subject seldom focuses on the uniqueness of particular state fairs.

The American State Fair is amply researched, engagingly written, and perceptive. Anyone who has ever strolled around a state fair-ground in late summer will find the book an enjoyable and informative tour of the history of these annual exhibitions. This book, like a well-run fair, aims simultaneously to educate and to please—a tricky balance to maintain, as any fair secretary could attest, but Derek Nelson succeeds admirably.

The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers' Workshop: Forty-Three Stories, Recollections, and Essays on Iowa's Place in Twentieth-Century Literature, edited by Tom Grimes. New York: Hyperion, 1999. xii, 766 pp. \$30.00 cloth.

A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, edited by Robert Dana. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999. xvii, 294 pp. Illustrations. \$17.95 paper.

The Eleventh Draft: Craft and the Writing Life from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, edited by Frank Conroy. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. xiii, 235 pp. \$23.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RONALD WEBER, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

"Iowa changed the course of American literature in the twentieth century," writes Tom Grimes at the end of *The Workshop*, his impressive anthology of stories and recollections by students who attended the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop over the course of seven decades (754). It's an unguarded remark in an otherwise balanced account of the Workshop that accompanies the volume. Hemingway, just possibly, altered the direction of American literature, but surely the Workshop did not. What can be said with some certainty is that it changed the way young people went about trying to become writers, another thing entirely.

Would-be writers used to think the route to the literary life was through newspaper offices—or through 57th Street in Chicago, Greenwich Village in New York, or the Left Bank in Paris. Since the 1940s they have, almost exclusively, assumed it was through university writing programs. And it is here that Iowa led the way, offering degree credit for creative work and developing M.F.A. and Ph.D. programs in writ-

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