

Carnival in the Countryside: The History of the Iowa State Fair

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evidence that has been neglected or perhaps not even recognized. Discovering whether they do could productively amplify the “viewer’s history” Finnegan has begun.

Carnival in the Countryside: The History of the Iowa State Fair, by Chris Rasmussen. Iowa and the Midwest Experience Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. vii, 206 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.50 paperback.

Reviewer Tom Morain is director of government relations at Graceland University and former administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa. He has taught Iowa history at several institutions and online and has been active in public history projects around the state.

Good histories spark curiosity on questions that their audiences may never have considered. On that scale, Chris Rasmussen plows new ground in his *Carnival in the Countryside: The History of the Iowa State Fair*. It is a good guess that among the record 1,117,398 visitors who passed through the gates at the 2015 fair, very few have ever given even passing consideration to the enormous complexities its production entails and fewer still to the philosophy behind its rise to become such an iconic tradition. Rasmussen, an American cultural and intellectual historian, is an Iowa native who earned a B.A. at Grinnell College and a Ph.D. at Rutgers. His passion for the fair is genetic. His father raced stock cars at the Iowa State Fair, he writes in his acknowledgments, and his mother “went for the country music.”

The book takes a chronological approach. The fair’s earliest advocates were local agricultural societies whose mission was to promote better farming by displaying the results of superior methods: bigger ears of corn, fatter hogs, bigger and faster horses. Through the rest of the year, the societies promoted “book farming” through lectures and papers, but the fair was where they put their products into competition to prove their superiority.

But their high-minded motives for agricultural exhibitions had to contend with the stubborn reality that the public wanted something else, or at least something more. Fair visitors wanted entertainment. A day spent looking at longer carrots or the latest cream separators just didn’t do it, especially for mom and the kids. Rasmussen documents the continuing struggle between those who promoted the fair as an educational experience and those who looked to entertainments to increase gate receipts that would pay the bills. Vendors and performers of every variety also coveted the dollars that fairgoers brought with them. At one time, vendors, tent shows, and games of chance were

kept outside the fence, but gradually, fair organizers allowed those they deemed wholesome and worthy inside, "midway" between the undesirable elements and the educational exhibits. Policing the "midway" added one more responsibility to the fair board's task. Fair officials found themselves challenged to protect the public from rigged games of chance and salacious sideshows while at the same time inviting those that could draw the crowds to provide the necessary revenue.

Rasmussen does a good job of explaining how the fair reflected the concerns of rural Iowa and the larger context of Iowa and midwestern culture. Economic hard times almost forced the state fair to close at times. Fair organizers wanted the fair to be a platform to proclaim the virtues of rural life. Anxieties in the early twentieth century occasioned by the growing perception of the disparities between the farm and the city were reflected in attention to the roles of farm women and youth. Art displays and healthy baby contests further broadened the scope of the agenda. The creation of the state extension service and its 4-H provided a strong source of educational programming and a reliable audience for the state fair that continues today. Unfortunately, the book stops its in-depth coverage of fair issues with the 1940s and provides only a few general comments in its final chapter about the entire last half-century.

The advent of movies and radio in the 1920s and '30s required fair organizers to get creative in its grandstand entertainments. Rasmussen brings to life the fascinating story of elaborately staged historical spectacles (using the term *historical* loosely) like the Trojan War or Cortez's conquest of the Aztecs. For example, Rasmussen records that, in 1916, "The Last Days of Pompeii" treated its grandstand audience to "gladiatorial combats, races, games, Egyptian dancers and other forms of merrymaking" before, as midwestern values required, Vesuvius erupted as divine retribution on such moral depravity (125). In 1932 grandstand visitors witnessed an Iowa State Fair classic: a staged collision between two speeding locomotives, the *Roosevelt* racing in from the left and the *Hoover* charging from the right. (The State Historical Society of Iowa has a video of the event.)

Rasmussen devotes a chapter to how the arts have been incorporated into the fair and how, in turn, the fair has been depicted in literature, painting, and movies. When painters were invited to enter their works for ribbons and prizes, the fair judges became cultural arbiters of what the standards of "Iowa" works should be. In the 1930s this pitted regionalists like Grant Wood, famous for depicting Iowa themes, against modernists who felt bound by no such restrictions, an argument that was playing out in larger art circles. The selection of judges be-

came a critical issue, and the fair finally allowed the artists themselves to vote on who would critique their work.

In 1932 Phil Stong's novel *State Fair* became a bestseller. It traced the experiences of the Frake family—father, mother, son, and daughter—as they spent a week at the Iowa State Fair. Ignoring the rural desperation of the Great Depression, the novel painted a bucolic vision of farm life even as the two grown children entered into romantic liaisons on the fairgrounds and in downtown Des Moines. The movie, starring Will Rogers and Janet Gaynor as parents, became a box office hit that, according to Rasmussen, “rescued Fox studio from bankruptcy.” Rasmussen omits mention of the 1962 *State Fair* remake starring Pat Boone and Ann-Margaret that moved the whole episode to Texas.

A viewpoint of the fair visitors themselves is one the book often fails to explore. The minutes of fair board meetings are available; first-hand accounts of the exhibits, food stands, or entertainments are not. What would the visitor to the 1880 fair see? What was behind the tent flaps the barkers were so vigorously extolling? Some of the most engaging sections of *Carnival* are its descriptions of the grandstand shows and 4-H demonstrations. For those, Rasmussen gives us front-row seats. Nevertheless, anyone who reads *Carnival in the Countryside* will never walk down the main concourse with the Varied Industries Building to the right and the raucous midway to the left and not begin to wonder again how it all came to be. Ours is indeed a great state fair. Don't miss it; don't even be late.

American Capitals: A Historical Geography, by Christian Montès. University of Chicago Geography Research Paper Number 247. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 394 pp. Map, tables, charts, illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Timothy R. Mahoney is professor of history at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He is the author of *Provincial Lives: Middle-Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West* (1999); *River Towns in the Great West: The Structure of Provincial Urbanization in the American Midwest, 1820–1870* (1990); and the forthcoming *From Hometown to Battlefield in the Civil War Era: Middle Class Life in Midwest America*.

In this intriguing and demanding book, Christian Montès relentlessly employs social-scientific analysis and model building to try to understand the character of American state capitals. Among Americans cities, state capitals are some of the most familiar and well known but hard to define and understand. The book begins with an informed commentary on the usual explanations. The author questions the traditional explanation that the location and scale of state capitals reflect