

## A Great State Fair: The Blue Ribbon Foundation and the Revival of the Iowa State Fair

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Walsh provides historical context before detailing Ray's role in helping both populations. In the case of the "boat people," Ray was moved by Ed Bradley's *60 Minutes* television report. Ray and five other governors visited Khmer camps in October 1979. On the day they visited Sa Khaeo, 50 people died (135).

Governor Ray was Christian enough to have compassion for refugee populations, conservative enough (by 1970s standards) to be strategic about resettling them in a fashion palatable to Iowans, and savvy enough to anticipate and blunt criticism. Ray's Iowa SHARES (Sends Help to Aid Refugees and End Starvation) program, launched over the 1979 Thanksgiving weekend, invited Iowans to buy a "share" in humanity for \$2.20, the price of a bushel of corn. Ray's goal of \$115,000 was nearly quadrupled, a sign of his moral and political leadership. By 1980, Ray was playing a crucial role in the creation of the Refugee Act of 1980, which guaranteed three years of federal support to states for the refugees they welcomed.

Walsh dedicates chapters to the perspectives of refugees and the sponsors who worked and lived alongside them. These chapters fit very comfortably in the broader literature of immigration and Southeast Asian refugee history. Shedding little new thematic light for scholars, they are nonetheless indispensable in the telling of this specific story. Walsh's book is as much about refugee agency as it is about Ray's leadership; the short shrift given those accounts in this review does not reflect their importance to our understanding of this subject.

Weaving oral history with state records and broader historical literature into a first-rate yet accessible, short narrative, Matthew Walsh effectively makes the case for Robert Ray's greatness and Iowa's unique role in the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees.

*A Great State Fair: The Blue Ribbon Foundation and the Revival of the Iowa State Fair*, by William B. Friedrichs. Des Moines: Business Publications Corporation, 2017. x, 178 pp. Illustrations, note on sources, notes, index. \$20.00 paperback.

Reviewer Michael Kramme is professor emeritus of theater at Culver Stockton College in Canton, Missouri. His most recent books are *The Governors of Iowa*, *The Schaffner Players*, and *Images of America: Washington, Iowa*.

William B. Friedrichs begins his book by acknowledging several recent books about the Iowa State Fair, explaining that his focus is on the story of the Iowa State Fair Blue Ribbon Foundation. He begins by giving a brief history of the fair. The first two fairs were held in Fairfield. Later fairs were held in Muscatine, Oskaloosa, Iowa City, Dubuque, Burling-

ton, Clinton, Keokuk, and Cedar Rapids before moving permanently to Des Moines in 1879. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Fair Board erected several Beaux-Arts buildings, including Exposition Hall, Machinery Hall, Administration Building, Agriculture Building, Livestock Pavilion, Women's and Children's Building, and livestock barns. Through the years, additional buildings, both permanent and temporary, were added to the grounds.

In 1980 the Women's and Children's Building (1914) was in great disrepair. It would have taken \$700,000 to renovate the structure. The Fair Board did not have enough funds for the project, so the building was razed. Many of the fair's other iconic buildings were also in disrepair, including the Administration, Agriculture, and Varied Industries buildings, the grandstand, and the 1920s Ye Old Mill. This was a wake-up call for the preservation of other buildings on the fairgrounds.

The Fair Board formed the Iowa State Fair Foundation. Its purpose was specifically to raise money for the fair and fairgrounds. After a slow start, it was reformed in 1993. Soon the Blue Ribbon Foundation was incorporated with John Putney as its first director, a position he held for several years. The first major success came in 1997, when Des Moines businessman Bill Knapp agreed to donate one million dollars. Other donations followed, and the foundation's coffers grew.

Members of the foundation began to educate legislators about the program. Many legislators were unaware that the state owned the fairgrounds. After much lobbying, the legislature agreed to several funding requests. A series of events and special programs followed, including the "Corn-dog Checkoff" passed by the legislature, allowing citizens to contribute to the fair on their state income tax forms. Other campaigns included "Treasure Our Fair" and "Rebuilding the Dream." "The Corn-dog Kickoff," a pre-fair party, became an annual event.

As the improvements continued, the fair's popularity increased to over one million visitors each year. After only a decade, the foundation helped raise an amazing \$53 million for the fair's facelift. At the time of the book's publication, the foundation had raised over \$135 million. As a result of the success of the Blue Ribbon Foundation's continuing efforts, the Iowa State Fair and its grounds have been transformed from a shabby embarrassment to a major part of Iowa's proud heritage.

Friedricks's book on the foundation is well illustrated, although a map of the fairgrounds would have been a good addition. He includes detailed documentation and a thorough index. The book might not be of interest to the average fair enthusiast, but it would be enjoyed by anyone interested in a behind-the-scenes story of the restoration of the fairgrounds and its return to former glory and a bright future.