

## County Fair Culture

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Another County Fair is history. The fair grounds are quiet again. The livestock are long gone, the wood shavings, hay, and manure have been hauled away. The lingering smells associated with livestock will be gone with the Kansas wind in another week. The pens are taken down, stacked and secured. Other equipment has been taken down, cleaned and put into storage. But for one glorious week, the fairgrounds had become a little community of it's own.

Like the classic musical "Brigadoon" the community of the county fair mysteriously rises (once a year instead of once every hundred years) and just as quickly disappears. Having been a 4-Her growing up and now a county extension agent for a few years, I've spent a lot of time at county fairs - in fact at least one just about every year. There could be a lot of discussion about history and tradition of county fairs, but it is certainly a culture all it's own.

In years gone by, county fairs were an annual gathering, often late in the summer or even into early fall. Farmers would gather at these expositions to show off the best of what they have grown and compete for the best or the most. These gatherings date back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and possibly earlier, well before the 4-H youth program came along a little over 100 years ago.

In those years farm families were isolated from all but their closest neighbors. Families may come to town once a week to do their shopping or gather at a local church, perhaps a rural church on Sunday. But those were the only times that the families were around each other. The County Fair, towards the end of the summer, was often the first time that many families had seen each other since the last county fair the previous year. There were friendships to renew, new friendships to make, their was livestock, crops and food to observe and enjoy! Everything else but essential daily chores stopped during the county fair.

There really was, and still is, a sense of community at the fair. You have the adults that sit around and discuss what's going on in society. You've got grandparents judging the judge and they job they are doing in judging whatever project their grandchildren are exhibiting. You've got others trying to observe and listen to the judge to gain insight on whatever is happening or changing in that particular project area. You have jealous gardeners looking at someone elses potatoes or onions or tomatoes trying to figure out how they can grow produce that looks this good. And you have nervous 4-Hers waiting to see if the woodworking judge is going to find and comment on that one part of the project that needed to be sanded just a little bit more.

I've spent a lot of time being a judge at other county fairs. I've seen some amazing projects and I've seen young 4-Hers with a project that was a little rough but showed a lot of potential. I always felt that judging at a county fair was an honor and the perfect teaching opportunity; one on one - the judge with the 4-Her. Total fixed concentration on the end result. Giving purple or blue ribbons was easy. But my objective was always that if I had to send that 4-Her away with a red or white ribbon that they went away feeling like a winner and having gained the knowledge of what they needed to get that project up to a blue or purple ribbon.

It's easy to go to the fair and see the end result and never see the blood, sweat and tears that were behind it. The project itself isn't the final result, but merely evidence of what was done. The final result is the knowledge, skills, lessons, even record keeping learned in the process of getting that project to the fair! That's the real county fair culture.