

The "Father" of the County Fair



ELKANAH WATSON

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

IT IS doubtful if one American in ten could tell you who Elkanah Watson was or what he did that should make his name remembered. Yet, about this time of the year millions of Americans who live on the farms of our country pay homage to his memory, unconsciously perhaps, by attending and participating in an annual event which is as distinctively American as baseball or the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving day. For Elkanah Watson was the "father" of the county fair and it was due to his persistence in promoting his idea more than a hundred years ago that rural America, and especially the youth of rural America, can look forward each year to "going to the fair." Insofar as the "county fair" is an institution which has a particular appeal to rural America, it is interesting to note that its founder was a city man. For such was the case, and it was a man, tired of city life, who retired to the country at the age of fifty years to enjoy "rural felicity" and, failing to find it, conceived the idea which resulted in the first real county fair.

Now, the idea of a fair itself is not exactly a new one. Fairs have been employed in Asiatic countries from time immemorial for the purpose of bringing traders and customers together for an exchange of their commodities. The great distances to be covered by the Asiatic merchant with his slow caravans, the sparsity of population, except in the cities, and the wide differences in language, religion and social and trade customs made a fair a necessity of commerce, especially among barbaric and semibarbaric peoples. Even in the European countries where fairs have been held for hundreds of years they were essentially affairs of barter and trade. So it remained for America, where the competitive spirit is so marked, to give the idea of a fair a new meaning and to make it an exchange of ideas, rather than an exchange of goods.

The first fairs of any sort held in this country were those sponsored by Dutch governors when New York was New Amsterdam, but they were modeled on the European plan. In 1641 Governor Kieft established two fairs in New Amsterdam, one on October 15 "for cattle generally," and the other on November 1 for hogs. In 1648 there was also held in the Dutch colony, late in August and at the beginning of September, a Dutch "kermess" which was strictly commercial, where the burghers met to exchange commodities. The custom was continued even under English rule and as late as 1670 had the sanction of Gov. Edmund Andros.

But the county fair of today is not a lineal descendant of the Dutch "kermess," although it may resemble it in some of its features. It grew out of the interest in agriculture which began to manifest itself early in the history of the new nation. The leaders of that time, such men as Washington and Jefferson, were farmers and farming was the most important business in the country. Between 1785 and 1792 agricultural societies sprang into being in Pennsylvania, Maine, New York, Massachusetts and South Carolina as evidence of the organized interest in agriculture. These societies began offering prizes for superior farm products but they held no fairs or exhibitions and really did but little to stimulate better farm production.

The principal interest seems to have been in live stock and in 1804 and 1805 three live stock exhibitions were held in Washington. At the second one members of congress began to take an interest and subscribed half of the \$100 fund which was raised and dis-

tributed as prizes for "the best lamb, sheep, steer, milch cow, jack, oxen and horses actually sold." In 1806 the Columbian Agricultural society was organized in Washington and held an exhibition in the city of Georgetown nearby. But this was not the sort of thing that appealed to the average farmer of the day for it was more or less a society event and, as some one has said, "its attendance list reads more like the social register, headed by the President of the United States and his lady and the cabinet members."

It remained for Elkanah Watson to originate a fair in which the common farmer would be interested because he could feel that he had a real part in it. Who he was and how he did this is described in the volume "Tollens of Land and Sea," in the Yale University Press "Pageant of America," as follows:

Elkanah Watson was not among the founders of the Eighteenth century school of agricultural experimenters and writers, but he was its most distinguished pupil. As a business man, he had traveled along the Atlantic seaboard and in Europe. In 1807 he gave up commerce and took up farming at Pittsfield, Mass. During the next four years he made his contribution to the development of American agriculture. By 1811 he had completed the organization of the Berkshire Agricultural society.

Watson wrote in 1820: "In the fall of 1807 I procured the first pair of merino sheep that had appeared in Berkshire, if not in the state. . . . I was induced to notify an exhibition of these two sheep under the great elm in the public square in Pittsfield on a certain day. Many farmers and even females were excited by curiosity to attend this first novel and humble exhibition. It was by this lucky accident I reasoned thus: 'If two animals are capable of exciting so much attention, what would be the effect of a larger scale, with larger animals? The farmers present responded to my remarks with approbation. We became acquainted and from that day to the present, agricultural societies, cattle shows, and all in connection therewith have predominated in my mind.'"

The Berkshire Agricultural society was founded in 1811. The principles on which it was based proved popular. Slowly at first, then more and more rapidly the Berkshire system spread until it reached west in the new states of Indiana and Illinois and even penetrated the southern cotton kingdom. Unlike its predecessor, the agricultural societies of Philadelphia and New York, it was an organization of the common farmer. In its time it served his interests well.

Watson was a student of human nature. The purpose of the organization was to hold each year an exhibition of the best handiwork and the best products of the farmers of the locality. Prizes were awarded for pre-eminence in farm animals and crops, and in butter, cheese and cloth made in the home. At the end of the exhibition came the general assembly in the largest village church. Here amid impressive ceremonies, the honors were distributed, each prize accompanied by a certificate of distinction which, handsomely framed, held a place of honor on the wall of the farmer's parlor.

Watson's greatest problem was to arouse the active interest of the ladies in these exhibitions. The diplomatic efforts to which he and others resorted in order to win over the country women, unaccustomed to activities outside their own homes and fearful of arousing comment by appearing in a public competition, were finally everywhere triumphant. At the end of the general assembly came the "pastor-

at ball." The whole plan was a skillful blend of competition, social intercourse and dignified formality.

For twelve years Watson labored endlessly to "put his idea across." By 1819, with the aid of Governor Clinton of New York, he had induced the legislature of that state to pass an annual appropriation of \$10,000 to aid the new societies and from that time on the idea spread rapidly. And, as the writer in the "Pageant of America," previously quoted, says:

The direct descendant of Watson's Berkshire system is the "county fair." Unlike the ancient fairs of Europe or those of early colonial days its central purpose is not to facilitate exchange and sale but to exhibit the best products and handiwork of the locality and to stimulate improvement by offering prizes. Horse races and a host of other attractions have added to its interest and excitement. From one day it has grown to three and four. Country folk drive in from miles around to look at the stock in their sheds and the produce on exhibition in the fair house and to watch the demonstration of improved machinery. The merry-go-round plays its strident tunes, the Ferris wheel swings round its lofty circuit, the barkers for the side shows bawl of the mysteries of the amusements within their tents. Yards of the inevitable taffy are consumed as acquaintances from distant corners of the county meet and gossip and separate in the ever-changing crowds that move over the grounds. It has become the farmer's carnival—far removed indeed from that first exhibition when Watson displayed his two merino sheep under the elm tree. In the Twentieth century the automobile has again brought changes. Farmers come from the distant counties and with them crowds of city people. The fair is no longer merely a farmer's institution.

Today it is estimated that there are more than 3,000 agricultural fairs held annually in this country, including the town, county, state, national and international exhibitions. Some specialize in live stock, some in dairy products, some in poultry, some in bees, in garden truck and others in field crops. But the greater part of them are the general county fairs which are held in August and September. Most of them now are in the Middle West, for New England, where the fair originated, has lost its leadership in number and importance of its fairs. But even though modern conditions have changed the county fair in many respects, essentially it is the same as it has been for the last half century or more. For this institution has an appeal which no other annual event in American life has and nothing ever can or likely will take its place. So the next time you spend a day at the county fair and enjoy the pleasures which only it can furnish, just give a thought for a moment to that "Yankee of Yankees who was born within rifle shot of Plymouth Rock," Elkanah Watson, and be grateful that he was willing to spend twelve years of his life popularizing an idea which won for him the title of "father of the county fair."

Plan Beautiful Lake

An artificial lake, three square miles in extent, and as beautiful in its surroundings as any natural lake in the country, is part of the North Wales scheme for providing electric power.

"You haven't seen him since you were a little baby. But I hope and pray you will see him soon. I expect him home in the next year or two."

"But where is he," persisted the youth.

"He's playing 36 holes of golf on the public links," explained the mother.

The first map on which the word Australia appears was published in the year 1824.

Coins Valuable Only to the Numismatist

Coins and currency once valued at millions of dollars make up the collection of Cere C. Standford of Gregory, S. D. The currency is worthless now, except to collectors. The most valuable piece in the collection was taken from ruins at Pompeii. One piece of Austrian currency, worth at one time \$500,000, is in the collection. In United States gold coins, Standford has \$2 and 50 cents in single pieces, a 50-cent and 25-cent gold coin. He has United States paper money in 50-cent, 10-cent, 25-cent and 5-cent denominations. A silver piece in the collection is one of three peace medals given by the United States to Indian chiefs in 1871. He has an Egyptian coin with the pyramids stamped upon it. Money used in Hongkong has a Chinese emblem on one side and the English Queen Victoria on the other. Coins from the Philippines have Spanish inscriptions on one side and English on the other.

Who Will Donate Peacock?

An obituary notice of a peacock, which had been a friend of the bishop of Worcester, England, and his family for some years, recently appeared in the Diocesan Gazette. The appreciation, written by the bishop, closes: "May I add that his disconsolate widow, being of the varium et mutabile sex, would, as she tells me, welcome another partner if any one has a peacock to spare."

Family Agreement

"And how do you get on with your wife?"

"I've a splendid working arrangement with her. In the forenoon she does what she wants and in the afternoon I do what she wants."—Dublin Opinion.

You Tell 'Em

George—It isn't the amount of money that a fellow's father has that counts here at college.

Gene—No, it's the amount of the father's money the son has.

On the Blacklist

The Producer's Agent—This here fillum shows married life as it is.

The House Manager—It'd never get by our local censors. Fight pictures are barred.

A Wet Remark

"Is Claude still mopping floors at the hotel yet?"

"Yes, he's the same old floor flusher."

It isn't what a man possesses that makes him happy, but what he doesn't want.

Bee Brand INSECT POWDER or LIQUID CEDAR ODR

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It Didn't Work

In a certain Indiana rural school, the teacher noticed that one youngster was not paying very close attention so she decided to catch him. She asked him which part of the story that they had just read he liked best. He studied a moment and said: "The part that Mary just told."

The teacher was not to be outdone and told him the class could listen to it again. "Well," he said, hesitatingly, "I don't know. I didn't hear what Mary said."

Hybrid Triumph

What is regarded as an achievement in plant breeding has just been accomplished in the production of a cross between a cabbage and a radish, says the Popular Mechanics' Magazine. The two are of remote relationship, hence the hybrid is considered far more remarkable than those yielded by crossing varieties that more closely resemble each other.

Inks in Bookkeeping

The use of red ink by many banks, particularly savings banks, to note interest is simply a matter of convenience, the interest being more easily distinguished from the principal sums by being written in colored ink. Any other color preferred may be used or it is not necessary to use a different color.

Pledge of Affection

He—Still love me?
She—Yes.
He—How much?
She—Bushels.
He—Then, say honey, couldn't I keep six bits out of my salary this week?

Nearly every newly married woman thinks that a lot of other women envy her.

MONUMENTAL WORKS
Cumberland, Md.; est. 1884; Tel. 150; Wg profits; mar. price \$12,850; File 3-2127.
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Leading agency in Maryland, covering 8 counties; well known cars; repts. \$110,000 yr.; price \$78,750, incl. r. & f. File 3-1525.
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LAUNDRY AND REAL ESTATE
Live Maryland city; price incl. property and machinery, \$12,000; Terms, File 3-1514.
GROCERY AND MEATS
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Clark's 25th cruise, 66 days, including Madeira, Canary Islands, Cebrante, Rabat, Capital of Morocco, Spain, Algiers, Malta, Athens, Constantinople, 16 days Palestine and Egypt, Italy. Includes hotels, guides, motors, etc.
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FRANK C. CLARK, Times Bldg., N. Y.

W. N. U., BALTIMORE, NO. 33-1928.

It's Called Progress

Yes, kids kissed in the old days. But when they had finished they said, "Good night." Instead of "hot dog."—Los Angeles Times.

Tie

"Are you engaged to that summer girl?"
"I am when I'm with her."

Hotel

"Is this hotel exclusive?"
"Not too exclusive. You'll want somebody around to snub."

It is sometimes more difficult to win the father's ear than the daughter's hand.

One of the earthly horrors is a sophisticated little boy, poor child.

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Blight Not Serious

It was at first thought that the destruction of the chestnut would leave large gaps in the forests, requiring extensive planting, but the results of recent investigations indicate that the blanke caused by the dead or salvaged chestnut are rapidly being filled by such valuable trees as the oaks, hickories and white ash, which can, in many respects, take the place of chestnut in the manufacture of wood prod-

ucts. The forests are still far from being fully productive, and will continue to be much below normal for a number of years after the blight has done its work, though progress toward complete recovery is nearly everywhere satisfactory.

Domestic Tragedy

"Mother," said the twelve-year-old boy, "have I got a daddy?"
"Yes, son," replied the mother.
"Then where is he? I don't remember ever seeing him."