

The Great Barrington Fair in the 1910s

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The Great Barrington Fair in the “good old days” – about 1910-20 – was really an event in the lives of many a Berkshire farm family. Perhaps we should say South Berkshire, for of course participation depended on available transportation. Automobiles were few and far between and exhibits if at all hefty were taken by wagon.

Sometimes it was possible to go by train. The Berkshire Street Railway’s trolley cars ran right by the fairgrounds, coming from both north and south. (They ran to Canaan, Conn andnd to Pittsfield, and I believe there were connections there with lines coming from North Adams and Bennington, Vt.)

The open cars, with each seat running the width of the car, and platforms along the length of each side on which a brave conductor walked to collect fares, were occasionally used if weather was permissibly warm. That wasn’t often the case, for the Fair was always held about the last week in September (for four days, Tuesday through Friday.) Why it was so late, I don’t know; very often frosts had affected gardens by then. I can never remember the frosts holding off then as they have of late years, nowadays even to Columbus Day. Perhaps it was partly a matter of when farm work best permitted farmers to take a holiday.

The Fair really began for us months before September – at the time the seed catalogs reached us the preceding January, and we wrote out our orders depending on how much we could afford and what could be exhibited. (The catalogs were not quite as gorgeous as they are now, but still pretty interesting to us.)

We had, of course, Burpee’s and Joseph Harris’, and one not all that gorgeous but fine because it sold seeds in penny packets (no pictures on envelopes, but good as to product’s quality).

The Fair, run by the Housatonic Agricultural Society, began in 1842. Each year it published an impressive Premium Book over which we pored eagerly. And after the Fair came another impressive book called Transactions, which listed winners in all classes. As I remember it, prizes were sums of money very similar to those given today – inflation seems to have made little difference in amounts. They were pretty important to farm wives and children who didn’t have many other ways to get a bit of cash. I recall one year when our parlor was full of pies the night before the Fair. Mother was a

very good pie maker and no doubt captured several prizes. She always exhibited “cumber sweet” and “tomato sour” (the former made from cucumbers after they had turned yellow and the latter from green tomatoes).

Recipes may have come from “Mrs. Rose’s Cookbook,” her copy of which by my day had become coverless. A fat book, it was made much fatter by Mother’s stuffing in innumerable recipe clippings and those of her friends written usually in her large and very distinctive hand. At the Fair she also exhibited in the sewing classes. One year she was pleased to receive the blue ribbon for a table cloth darn.

My great grandfather Henry Smith, grandfather Henry Lee Smith and father Henry Smith were all presidents of the Housatonic Agricultural Society. One of the duties of the president in Father’s time was to introduce the governor when he gave a talk to the audience in the grandstand. Getting ready to go to the Fair that morning was an ordeal for Father. That day a collar button or cufflink always rolled under the bureau or somewhere else out of sight and “Em” (Mother) always was called to come quickly or to locate it. There couldn’t have been too much time to get dressed, because a large number of cows had to be fed and milked (by hand, of course) and stables cleaned before the early start to the Fair.

Our first impressions of the fair when we were youngsters came from what Father brought home to us before we were old enough to go – a balloon and a squawker, and sometimes a toy whip. Later, when we were old enough to go, our first trips always included a ride on the merry-go-round.

Our spending money was pretty limited, so we could not often take in the sideshows or the other kinds of rides (I rode on the Ferris wheel just once) or the so-called games of skill. There were not so many kinds of rides or games as later. There were “guess your weight” men and cotton candy vendors. The midway was not much different from today’s luscious odors of dinner cooking and corn popping and plenty of others; and terrible noises from some of the sideshows.

We ate our lunches in the grandstand.

Buildings were not too different from now, except that there was one more then – a large, two-story hall at the west side of the grounds which burned down later.

Thursday was Governor’s Day, when almost always the governor of Massachusetts and his retinue visited the Fair. I can remember seeing Calvin Coolidge there, and hearing about Governor Foss and Governor Cox.

Nearly every school nearby closed on Friday for Children’s Day.

Father always won a blue ribbon on his string of corn. After the best ears were selected, the husks were braided, making them one of the few kinds of recreation for Father. He won blue ribbons on them at Madison Square Garden in New York City, too.

Our corn, at Corn Hill Farm in Lee, was 12-rowed flint. Later eight-rowed flint became fairly popular, but I can't remember our ever raising it. Dent corn I can't recall at the Fair then (and we never raised it).

The earliest part of the Fair program was the contest for standing crops. The Housatonic Agricultural Society had teams of leading farmers go out during the summer to select winners of growing corn, potatoes, grass, etc. Father went out corn judging.

Exhibits at the fair differed from today's. They included large crocks of butter and fancy packs made in wooden molds with design raised on one side.

Cold-pack canning was just beginning to supersede open-kettle.

There were plenty of jams, jellies and pickles. Grange exhibits were interesting, then as now.

I usually exhibited flowers and vegetables, and once won third prize on a 4-H pig. (4-H groups were just starting. I joined sewing, canning, and pig raising. I won a county championship and consequent trip to State Champ in Amherst in a pig project, which was stressed during World War I.)

Great Barrington Fair then was a real agricultural fair. There was harness-racing, but it didn't play that much a part. (I don't believe there was betting.) There were grandstand shows. The marshal was always a Slater from Tyringham – a man of fine stature wearing a gorgeous shoulder-sash and riding a beautiful horse that stepped proudly along. Those were the “good old days.”

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