



David Creamer/The Sower

Tim Murphy, 20, of Franklin, washes that grime right outta Bossy's hair after the Future Farmers of America cattle show.

Of calves, corndogs and carnivals

Fairgoers are a loyal bunch. Magical sights and sounds and smells of the fair pull them in each summer, as surely as children followed the Pied Piper . . .

Jack Chapman started small. In 1924, he and some school friends held the first Golden Valley County Fair in an old machine shed.

"It was a one-day deal," Chapman said. The kids showed just a few hogs and cattle — and maybe some canned goods, too, he said.

The kids grew up. Chapman sold insurance and real estate in Hebron. But he never lost his love for the fair.

Chapman retires at age 73 in January after 26 years on the Nebraska State Fair Board and two years as president.

The fair has grown up some, too, since Chapman joined the board. He's seen the fairgrounds expand and modernize. He's watched the exhibits grow bigger and better.

But Chapman still wouldn't call the fair sophisticated.

"No," he said. "We're just good, common folks."

For many rural Nebraskans, fair time is time to show off. Products of long hours of work fill the exhibition halls and livestock pens. Rows and rows of them: Bottled beans. Crazy quilts. Homemade farm machines. Well-groomed animals.

Some bear blue and purple ribbons. Ribbons make entries worth the work.

Kay Smith woke at 5 a.m. to fill 11 pie crusts with custard, fruit and meringue.

"I couldn't make any money doing this commercially," said the 47-year-old Lincoln homemaker. Two first prizes and a second — at least once a year — are pay enough, she said.

Beverly Gish cut another slice of pie and set it beside five others on a thick paper plate. She and Judy Weber tasted 108 pies that day, one small bite at a time — taking coffee and potato chip breaks to revive deadened taste buds.

up, when the snow is over, a cold blast from a hose washes the sticky mess away.

"Animals just weren't made to be shampooed every day," said Rosalie McKnight of Chapman.

Mother of four 4-H'ers, McKnight is a state fair veteran. The kids all tend their own projects, she said. But at fair time, Mom and Dad turn out to help.

"It's a whole-family deal," she said. The fair means long days for booth

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His apparent lack of concern for attendance seems out of character, since Brandt is the one who stands to lose the most if the fair goes under. As fair manager, Brandt gets a house on the fairgrounds, receives phone and utilities stipends, and earns a \$43,000 salary. Fair revenues cover everything except \$12,000 of his salary, which is paid out of a \$100,000 state appropriation — peanuts compared to the \$2.8 million fair budget.

But his complacency is based on a history of success. During the last 20 years, the fair has built up a \$7 million investment fund out of surplus revenues from the salad days of the fair, a cushion that can be used or borrowed against when times are tough.

And after 20 years as fair manager, 62-year-old Brandt is not too worried about job security.

"When I took this job, there wasn't hardly a roof that didn't leak," Brandt says.

It's true he has a lot to be proud of. There isn't much on the fairgrounds that pre-dates the Brandt era. And fair attendance has increased by 30 percent since Brandt took over in 1965. Based on census figures, one in every three Nebraskans attends the state fair annually.

A cattleman from Beatrice, Brandt worked on the board of the Gage County fair and served as president of the Nebraska Associa-

tion of Fair Managers prior to his term as state fair manager. Since Brandt succeeded the retired Ed Schultz, Brandt has held several national offices with the international fair association, including a term as president in 1981.

While the fair is governed by a board of 29 directors from across the state under the auspices of the State Board of Agriculture, Brandt rules the fair with a heavy hand. He gets the credit when things go well, and the blame when things sour.

After 115 years, the fair has become a Nebraska institution. One that Brandt says he's not ready to write off yet.

"As a kid, I always loved to go to the fair," he says. "I still do."

In his office, 200 yards from his house, he greets his guests with a smile and a firm handshake. Two windows frame his world. On his left, the midway — behind him, the track. A plaque on his desk silently reminds all who enter: "Right or wrong, I'm still the boss."

Participation is up. Brandt says that's what the fair is all about.

"All the rest of this . . ." he says, gesturing toward his attendance and revenue figures. "All the rest of this just goes along with it."

—Brad Kuhn



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Shops and booths crowd the state fair midway, each boasting its own tempting sights and smells: spicy footlongs, sizzling hamburgers, sweet-spun cotton candy.



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Round and round and round she goes, but where she stops only Wilbur Crowley knows. Crowley, 62, captains the Ferris wheel at this year's fair.

workers in the exhibition halls. Many are there 11 hours a day, peddling everything from used T-shirts and weather vanes to fine china. Some lean with their hands on their chins. Some tap their fingers restlessly. A white-haired woman dozes in the booth for the Retired Senior Volunteer Program.

They wait for passers-by to stop. Most just saunter by, chewing greasy corn dogs and licking ice cream cones.

"Step right over here, sir. See the Dial-A-Matic. It dices. It slices. Makes shoestring potatoes. Julienne carrots. They may not taste better, but they look better."

Frosty Wishon has sold vegetable slicers for 26 years. He works the fair circuit in summer and shopping malls in winter. He works long hours, hawking the Dial-A-Matic from his little outdoor booth.

For Wishon and many others, the Nebraska State Fair is just another 11 days on a long schedule of carnivals and fairs.

And it's pretty much like all the rest, said Larry Freeman, 39, ride operator for Blue Grass Shows. Freeman was a car hop at a Peoria, Ill., drive-in before joining the carnival 18 years ago. Now he lives in a trailer, travels from fair to fair and runs the Spider ride for 11 hours a day.

What's a carnie to do for fun? "Drink," Freeman said with a toothless grin. "And make love."

Freeman travels with his buddy Mike Estos, a 20-year-old from Los Angeles. The son of concession-stand operators, Estos has worked fairs as long as he can remember.

"I always wanted to be a disc jockey," he said. "Once you get in this business, you never get out."

—Ann Lowe