

# IOWA HISTORY



*Courtesy Library of Congress*  
An Iowa corn field

## State Fair of 1868: Gloomy, But Motivational

The Iowa State Fair of 1868, the 15<sup>th</sup> annual, was a disappointment in some ways. The event was held “on the old grounds” between Clinton and Lyons. It was supposed to run from Tuesday, September 29 to Friday, October 2. However, because Wednesday brought unfavorable weather, the fair was extended until Saturday night. The extra day didn’t do much to improve a disappointing turnout.

Although it promised to bring together the best from “farms, flocks and herds” as well as “orchards, gardens, workshops and household exhibitions,” when accounts were settled cash receipts totaled less than the previous year. The \$7200 in receipts were about \$2400 less than the 1867 state fair had brought in. Premiums in 1868 totaled \$4600, compared to \$3600 the year before. The fair fell a “round thousand” short of meeting its expenses. Officials blamed it on the weather.

Despite the gloomy financial report, a bright spot of the fair was a lengthy, but motivational, speech given by Peter Melendy, president of the Iowa State Agricultural Society. He reminded Iowans that the state had started as a “wild country” overrun by “fierce and warlike savages.” And in only a short time the state had become the “happy home” of over a million people. He said Iowans owed the success of the state to agriculture.

But President Melendy warned young men of Iowa about an alarming evil that threatened the state. He expressed his concern that the younger generation of Iowans were developing a “strong aversion” to farm labor. He feared they mistakenly believed the only honorable work took place within the walls of a “counting room,” the “glittering walks of professional life,” or in the “sequestered halls of classic learning.”

“No, young men of Iowa, harbor not for a moment such suicidal notions,” President Melendy cautioned.

He told his listeners that the growth and progress of the state was one of the most remarkable accomplishments in the history of the human race. And he implored the younger listeners to resist the “false glare” of other professions that might “court your affections.” President Melendy promised that there was no vocation more honorable or deserving than “the cultivation of the soil.”

According to President Melendy, a farmer had fewer cares and more lasting enjoyments, including better health and energy than most. He warned that many young men had left the farm for vocations that would make them “more of a gentleman” only to find in a few years that they had made a terrible mistake. They often fell into misfortunes and even crime, ending in “an untimely grave.”

“No, young men of Iowa, be not ashamed of the farm, the good old farm. Love it, Love it!” President Melendy said.

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#### Sources

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