

# IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)

Fair Camping in 1939

## **Covered Wagon Camping at the Fair**

*Over \$3000 in premiums*

*Cashmere goats*

*Over 1600 entries*

It was the Iowa State Fair of 1860—the seventh ever held. The state was young—only 14 years old. The American Civil War had not yet started in 1860. The capital had only recently been moved to Des Moines from Iowa City. The population of the state was not quite 700,000.

The first few years the fair traveled to various towns in the state—Fairfield, Muscatine, Oskaloosa, Dubuque, and Burlington. In 1860 the fair was held in Iowa City on a 25-acre plot of land. There were two halls—horticulture and fine arts.

The fair was held in September in 1860. The first few days had seen low attendance as rain had hampered travel from any distance. After all, fair goers were coming in on horseback and wagons. Rain slowed their progress.

When the rain dispersed families rolled in by covered wagons and set up their provisions on the campgrounds. They numbered in the “several thousands” according to an article in *The New York Times*. (Apparently the Iowa State Fair was of interest to New Yorkers as well as Iowans.) Those who preferred more luxurious accommodations stayed at with private families who extended fairgoers “cordial hospitality.” The hotels were filled to overflowing.

A good number of the 88,000 farmers in the state came. In the evening the “practical and more intelligent portion of the farmers” gathered to discuss subjects of vital interest to them. (It’s not reported how the fickle and less intelligent ones spent the evening.) Topics discussed: varieties of fruits, methods of cultivation, and characteristics of various breeds of livestock. The “fair hands of the Hawkeye state”—women—were there too. Their handiwork and food stuff was displayed on long tables. The newspaper reported the women of Iowa were as competent as “their sisters in the older states.” Juveniles took part in horsemanship events—driving and trotting their horses in competition for a “small purse.”

Exhibitions offered a wide variety of goods—Durham and Devon cattle, Spanish and French merino as well as Cotswold sheep, several breeds of swine, and fowl. A pair of Cashmere goats attracted considerable attention. And the horse exhibitions were impressive—carriage, draught, single buggy, and saddle horses. Samples of sorghum syrup and sugar were available. Sorghum was extensively raised in the state at the time and was an important crop for Iowa farmers. The judges pronounced the sugar “far superior to the southern cane sugar.”

The mechanical department at the fair offered grand displays of farm machinery. There were threshing machines, reapers, mowers, sowers, plows, cultivators, and portable grist mills. Fruits and vegetable were in abundance—melons and apples, potatoes, squash, and beets.

At the Hall of Fine Arts needle work, drawing, painting, and weaving were displayed. John Clark of Cedar Rapids exhibited woolen cloth he had manufactured. Samples of tanned leather from an Iowa City citizen took first place premium.

The Iowa State Fair of 1860 was considered a grand success. At the close proceeds equaled \$3700—\$1500 more than any previous fairs.

#### Sources

“Iowa State Fair,” *Chicago Press and Tribune*, Oct 9, 1860.

“Iowa State Fair,” *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1860.

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