

Fairs: What's the Big Deal?



News release
Palmyra Spectator

The fairs are over. Anyone who has attended the Marion County Fair, Monroe City Fair or any other has seen the rows of animals, the dozens of baked food exhibits, visual arts, cured hams, woodworking, clothing and all the rest. We've seen the pictures in the paper of winners galore with animals, trophies, and handshakes from sponsors. Often we see those things as just part of life in our county and community. A larger question, though is, "what does it all mean?"

Good question! Often fairs and shows occur from year to year though the sheer force of the inertia behind decades of previous events just like them. We know, for example, that a county fair of one form or another has been held in the Palmyra community since before the Civil War, with just a few years off here and there for war and hard times.

"Why have a Fair this year? Because we had one last year!", is sometimes the rationale. Conducting a Fair is usually a healthy thing for a community to do for itself. It is a chance for us to "celebrate ourselves." Putting on a Fair is a chance to work together on a common project that gives us all a chance to participate and contribute. There are few other events on the community level that can involve all ages and almost all interests.

For 4-H members and their families, the motivation behind participating in and conducting a Fair includes those reasons and also goes much deeper. An exhibit at the Fair, is a benchmark -- whether a simple plate of cookies or an animal. For some, the fair entry symbolizes the end of a 4-H year. For others, it is a chance to show the community and others 4-H members what they have accomplished, with a hint as to what is to come. For others, it is a chance to seek recognition and awards.

That exhibit is not the end product, but merely an indication of a many months or years of work on the part of the member and their family. For our non-animal exhibits, we changed our method of judging a few years back, to a form known as "Interview Judging". Traditionally, exhibits were delivered to the fair for display, and the member returned a few hours later to find out what ribbon rating they had earned. In the Interview method, the member actually meets with the judge to answer question about what effort went in to completing the exhibit. What did they learn? What frustrations did the member encounter? What level of help did the member have from an adult or older member? These are all points for discussion between the member and the judge.

The result of that interaction is a member that has a much better sense of what they did well and what can be improved upon in the future. The judge can base their evaluation on the learning and personal growth that occurred in the member, not just on the merits of the exhibit. Since the growth and development of kids is our goal, not the production of things to show, this is a process that has worked very well for 4-H. So, next year when you walk down the aisle of county Fair, you can know that each exhibit sitting display symbolizes an import point in the journey of a young person as they grow into a capable adult.

Think the fair is just about cotton candy and carnival rides? Think again!

Don Nicholson
4-H Youth Specialist
Courthouse, Rm 201
Palmyra MO 63461
573/769-2177