



Community Fairs Celebrate America's Harvest Season

By KATHRYN MCCONNELL

Every year, communities across the United States celebrate the start of the harvest season at festive social gatherings featuring the finest accomplishments of their citizens, young and old, rural and urban.

These annual fairs, open to all, are part exposition, part carnival and part opportunity to learn about new technologies, sample new foods and hear from political candidates. Fairs occur at the regional, or county level, and, on a larger scale, at the state level.

Some state fairs have histories going back to the mid-1800s. Many of the largest are held in states where agriculture continues to have a major role in the local economy—midwestern states such as Minnesota and Iowa, and western states such as California.

Some southern states with long growing seasons hold their fairs in early winter, when they can also be enjoyed by vacationers from other states and abroad. Florida, a major citrus-producing state with a large tourism industry, holds its fair in mid-February.

Over the years, fair organizers have

expanded on their goal of promoting agriculture and providing a place for farmers to share ideas and techniques by featuring competitions in a variety of categories such as fine arts and handicrafts, food preparation and science. However, the largest competitive programs in many states continue to be agriculture-based.

Most fairs feature competitions for accomplishments such as nurturing a healthy calf or raising a sheep with soft, thick wool. Prizes also might be awarded for baking the best pie or stitching the most intricate embroidery.

Taking advantage of the large crowds drawn to fairs, politicians stand for hours in the sun or rain at the fairs expressing their views about current issues and answering questions from constituents.

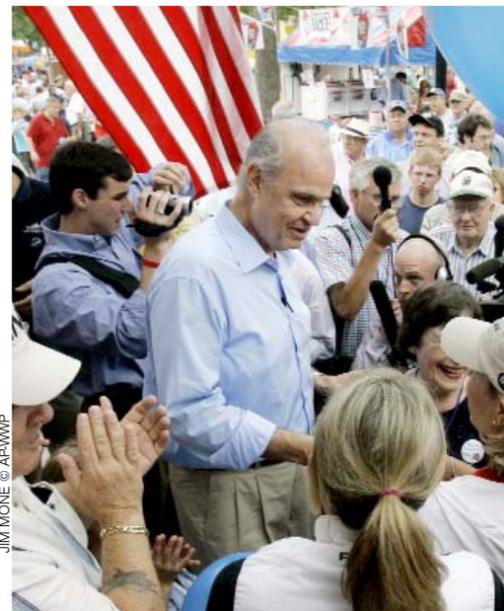
After touring a fair's exhibits, many people end their day in the carnival or concert areas, for an evening of entertainment.

St. Paul, the capital city of Minnesota,

Fred Thompson, an actor and former Senator seeking to be the Republican candidate for President, campaigns at the Minnesota State Fair in August 2007.

welcomed the Minnesota State Fair in August 2007. Since the fair's inception in 1859, there have been only five interruptions: in 1861 and 1862 due to the Civil War and the Dakota Indian conflict, in 1893 because of scheduling conflicts with the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in 1945 because of war-time fuel shortages, and in 1946 during a polio epidemic.

During the 12-day Minnesota fair, children from urban areas, whose only knowl-



edge of life on a farm comes from television and films, can get a close-up view of cows, pigs, chickens and rabbits raised since birth by rural children.

Nearly 1.7 million people attended the 2007 fair, where rodeo events, tractor pulls, auctions and games appealed to a range of tastes, as did the mind-boggling variety of foods like apple fries, Coca-Cola cheesecake dipped in chocolate on a stick, fried fruit on a stick and peanut butter hot dogs.

The 2007 fair had some new features, including the demonstration of a new robotic milker, wine sampling, and variety shows featuring comedians, magicians and acrobats.

Now, even though the barns are empty and the crowds are gone, planning has already begun for next year's fair.

Kathryn McConnell is a USINFO staff writer.

For more information:
 Minnesota State Fair
<http://www.mnstatefair.org/>
 Directory of State Fairs in America
www.ncstatefair.com

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Colorful glimpses of the Minnesota State Fair, which attracted nearly 1.7 million people in August 2007.

Bottom: Artist Robin Berth paints a 63-kilogram polyurethane cow that was part of an exhibit at the 2001 Minnesota State Fair.