

## The Bauer County Fair: Community Celebration as Context for Youth Experiences of Learning and Belonging

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*The county fair has long been an important institution for popular education in rural communities across the United States. A precious few endure as community celebrations that give center stage to intergenerational learning. The fair is multidimensional, reaching back to sustain activities that have been central to local lifeways, reaching out to incorporate each succeeding generation, and reaching forward to stretch participants' horizons. Those elements that emerged as critical to young participants' experiences of learning and belonging are summarized in this report of 5 years of participant observation in Bauer County, Wisconsin.*

For 140 years, "The Biggest Little Fair in Wisconsin" has played a pivotal role in maintaining and transmitting the rural lifeways that sustain Bauer County<sup>1</sup> as a viable, vital place. While other county fairs have gone the way of the drugstore cafe counter or have been so commercialized and homogenized as to bear little resemblance to the particular locale sponsoring the fair, the Bauer County Fair has endured as a community celebration. The key to its continued attraction lies in the fact that from its inception, the fair's central mission has been public education. It has provided an uniquely effective, nonschool means through which traditional cultural values, skills, and relationships are transmitted from generation to generation. Through the intergenerational events that constitute the fair, young participants are drawn into an engaging community celebration of both learning and belonging.

Like the colorful images created in a kaleidoscope, fairs are never the same from year to year or from person to person. Each time they are experienced, the intersecting patterns come alive for the viewer in unique ways. Fairgoers synthesize symbols, roles, and images from overlapping spheres, bringing them together in ways that present coherent pictures of ever-evolving local lifeways. It is not in the regularity of these patterns, but the fascinating number of possible recombinations from a limited number of constituent parts that the fair's enduring appeal may be understood. In this research, I identify the varied and vivid

elements critical to young fairgoers' experiences of learning and belonging. How do they make meanings of the resulting patterns, both for themselves and their futures? Further, as in a kaleidoscope backed with a mirror, young participants also see images of themselves reflected, inverted, and exaggerated through the prism of the fair. Delving further into young participants' multilayered experiences, this research then explores the ways in which this county fair also contributes to a critical understanding of themselves and their communities.

### The County Fair

Since its founding, the Bauer County Fair has served as a gathering space and time for people from this rural Wisconsin county. It was once the premier annual festival when people from the many little towns and open lands came together. Although it now must compete with cable television, shopping malls, and large outdoor concerts as a provider of entertainment and education, this fair has retained a prominent place in the annual cycle of special events.

The Bauer County fairgrounds are located on the edge of the county seat, tucked between a wooded riverside, new houses on the edge of town, and the edges of sprawling wheat and corn fields. Compared to some of its neighboring festivals, it is a small fair without pretense, made up of buildings that look much like those in the surrounding countryside. The white, wooden grandstand and the cross-shaped exhibition hall built in 1896 stand as reminders of the long history of the fair. The three newer, aluminum-siding barns that fill the far end of the fairgrounds portend continued, if slow, growth. The merchant's hall, the 4-H dairy bar, the fair office, the 4-H exhibition building, and the Farm Bureau and Jaycees' food stands fill in the middle of the fair-

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<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms are used throughout.

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grounds. Even though they are, in theory, movable from year to year, machinery row, the beer and entertainment tents, and the midway all have their traditional places.

Although small in size, the Bauer County Fair brings in a big crowd. In the 5 years of my study, the mean fair attendance was 27,089, or the equivalent of 82% of the county's population. The total attendance reflects a steady increase over time that has remained commensurate with gains in the county's population. People from many walks of life and generations attend the fair; as many come for several days as come only for the big-name entertainers in the evening. However, the fair is primarily designed to be a family event. Entrance fees reflect this emphasis; in 1995, a family of four could enter the fair for less than \$10. Senior citizens make the trip to spend the day playing bingo or listening to old friends in the shade of the beer tent. Couples, perhaps visiting from the nearby suburbs, proudly show off their newest additions to relatives and friends. Young adults who have just completed their first week away at college come back to see high school pals and "fair friends."

Fair week dominates local social calendars, drawing in even those who do not have exhibits to show. The importance of this annual event in a county without a large mall, teen center, or many social events for geographically isolated youth should not be overlooked. When asked why he came, a non-exhibiting teen reflected the relative excitement of the fair: "Where else would I go this weekend? Everybody hangs out here—it's the only place anything is happening."

The history of the growth of the Bauer County Agricultural Association and their annual fair parallels that of many other similarly positioned communities. The Agricultural Association has its roots in the model that Elkanah Watson set down in 1810. Interested in developing an informed consumer base for the wool of his imported Merino sheep, Watson hosted a fair that included exhibit categories for products from both farm and home, from men and women. The opportunity for the average "dirt farmer" to participate in this fair set these celebrations apart from the elite gentlemen's sheep fairs of the colonial past that never enjoyed a popular following.

Encouraged by the response, Watson also founded a "practical society" in order to cultivate support for the nascent county fair movement that he had helped to spark. Such agricultural societies have remained the organizing force for county fairs in this country. Societies organized along his "Berkshire Plan"—those that held public education about agriculture in paramount importance, hosted fairs as their primary activity, and remained locally controlled—were readily adopted, becoming the predominant rural institution in 19th century America (Cremin, 1980, p. 329).

Throughout the Great Plains region that in the mid-19th century formed the western frontier of the expanding

United States and Canada, towns were springing up, and with them, local fairs. They were variously advertised as "county fairs," "fat stock shows," or "fall harvest festivals," but all shared the same essential features (Neely, 1935; Waters, 1939). These celebrations served to mark these aspiring communities as "a place" (Coates, 1985; Doyle, 1982), displaying to self and others "the earnestness of our own efforts to build a greater and more wholesome city" (Centennial Pageant Committee, 1948). Such public events provided ready material for politicians to extol the virtues of a nation coming of age. President McKinley, in an oft-quoted speech, declared, "Fairs and exhibition are the time-keepers which mark the progress of nations. They record the country's advancement; they stimulate the energy, enterprise and intellect of the people and quicken human genius" (Jones, 1983, p. 18).

In the dislocating eras of frontier exploration and settlement, ethnic and national identities were being contested, constructed, and conglomerated. At the same time, the county fairs reinforced a sense of group identity, highlighting that which was unique to the hosting region or county. Fairs "absorbed the truly American traditions that went along with barn raisings, corn huskings, and quilting bees" (Augur, 1939, p. 251), building on community solidarity and a sense of uniqueness. A fair provided for local and visitor alike "an image of its setting, providing a glimpse of how fair people view themselves and their region, what they feel they have accomplished and what they see as still needing to be done" (Coates, 1985, p. 211). In its own way, each fair evolved its own particular traditions, remaining "truly native, keeping close to the ground and to the people who earn their living out of the ground" (Augur, 1939, p. 232).

Throughout the rural frontiers, county fairs provided unduplicated educational forums that played a pivotal role in the acceptance and adoption of scientific approaches to agriculture. These "farmer's universities" (Augur, 1939, p. 252) embodied the ideas of progress. Fairgoers learned that wheat was not the only thing that could be grown profitably (Doyle, 1982, p. 5), but that such strange crops as Chinese sugar cane existed (Sellinger, 1952). A wondrous array of products were on display: windmills, artificial teeth, sarsaparilla and birch beer, tropical birds, fine millinery, and more. New inventions like the Universal clothes wringer, sewing machines, threshers, and refrigeration were displayed (Craycroft, 1989; Frost, 1947; Gasch, 1988; Sellinger, 1952). Through exhibition and example, new ideas were presented to fairgoers that they were challenged to try out for themselves. Like most other chroniclers of fairs, Jones (1983) extolled the value of a fairtime education, while recognizing the sometimes reluctant nature of the farmers to change their ways:

Ideally, the competition was an apprenticeship. Moved by criticism of their exhibits, the also-rans and the ignorant would, in theory, discard their shoddy workmanship and inefficient ways, their inferior crops and defective seeds, their second-rate machinery and scraggly stock. Soon they would become paragons for others to follow. Uplifted by the knowledge that the fairs propagated, they would be equipped to feast on the finest in life and to cope with the worst. (p. 3)

Because they were local, people of average means could load their families into their buckboards or, later, pack a hamper into the rumble seat and spend several days at the fair (Gasch, 1988; Sellinger, 1952). Fairs were a vital link to the wider world that provided information, comparison, and conversation for those who did not or could not attend lectures or subscribe to journals (Nesbit, 1985, p. 25). Especially in isolated rural regions, "the fairs were," as a farm woman said in 1913, "the schools we could afford to attend" (Jones, 1983, p. 136). Such an embodiment of pride and progress were these celebrations to their individual communities, that members of an Edmonton, Canadian town vehemently opposed regional fair consolidation on the charge that "removing the country fair is equivalent to the removal of the public school in rural districts" (Jones, 1983, p. 139).

Once the preeminent place to exchange the latest techniques, innovations, and trends, county fairgrounds still serve as important venues for continuing education. However, there has been a marked shift away from adult vocational education towards an emphasis on youth at county fairs. And in the shift, fairs like the one in Bauer County have taken on renewed importance as forums for cultural transmission and investment in the younger generations. As service club members stated from their food stand, now "everything's for the kids."

Today, youth clubs such as Future Farmers of America (FFA) and Future Homemakers of America (FHA), the Boy and Girl Scouts, and 4-H provide organized means for young people to develop skills and then bring exhibits to the fair. Indeed, as these groups became more widely popular in the rural towns in the Midwest and agriculture and manual training classes more widely offered in the high schools, county fairs came to organize their youth divisions along categories of exhibits that matched the projects and coursework provided through these other groups (Centennial Pageant Committee, 1948; Craycroft, 1989; Doyle, 1982; Neely, 1935; Sellinger, 1952). However, at present, exhibit categories are not just limited to those items that are regularly produced at school. Therefore, the fair offers additional niches for youth to explore. Once an appendage tacked on to the regular fair program, today the youth exhibits and events are the heart of the Bauer County Fair.

The incorporation of younger generations into fair activities has had, and continues to have, a pragmatic base. In the early 20th century, organizers of the Bauer County Fair recognized that the exodus of talented and ambitious young people from rural areas posed a threat, and increased efforts to recruit youth to more meaningful participation in the fairs. As exemplified by an ad placed in the 1927 premium book, calf clubs and special youth classes at the fair were instituted in large part to establish ties between youth and agriculture that could last a lifetime. Under the picture of a boy and his calf with the caption "A proud boy," the text reads, "DEVELOP AN INTEREST IN FARMING BY OWNERSHIP. Every Boy Likes to Care for His Calf or Pig IF HE OWNS IT. It ties them to the Farm." The text by the second picture of another boy and his calf reads, "Why should he leave the farm, When He Is a Partner in the Business?"

### *Celebration*

The Bauer County Fair is a celebration on a highly personal scale. Celebrations are multifaceted, highly educational events. As cultural performance, they dramatize the ideals, aims, and aspirations of the participants in a public and playful manner. As collective symbolic representation of who we are, they carry within them the seeds of who we might be. As communally experienced, choreographed events, festivals hold within them the power to evoke, organize, fascinate, and synthesize. As rites of passage, they incorporate younger generations into the heritage that gives modern life context and a sense of continuity. In festival, people of many different groups come together, whereas in other contexts they may be divided because of socially significant differences in occupation, residence, or age. Through celebration participants educate themselves and one another.

*A separate space.* The fair is time and space reserved to celebrate the common orientations around which communities coalesce. Fairtime is a time set apart to enjoy oneself and one's fellows. It is a quasi-religious space spatially and temporally removed from the spaces where one engages in the serious business of life, whether it be earning a living or earning good grades. "See you at the fair!" declares the sign above the business that has closed its doors and moved itself to the fairgrounds for the weekend. The fairgrounds themselves have become an "elaborated place" (Abrahams, 1982, p. 161), both the setting and symbol of rural folklife (Fitchen, 1991). It is indeed a space located betwixt and between, an event that unites the everyday with the transcendent, the literal with the symbolic.

The annual fair sets aside time, at least temporarily, to suspend the influence of the mass public culture and to concentrate on what makes the people of this county distinctive. Focus turns inward. Especially for groups that feel

threatened by accelerating changes to their traditional lifestyles, this time to take stock and reflect is particularly valuable. Burke states that such “exclusive moments—coalescing around class or ethnicity—are associated with a resistance to modernization and a (re)affirmation of an oppositional identity” (1992, pp. 293-294). However, such moments can also lead to greater recognition of strategic—and not necessarily undesirable—interdependence with the outside world.

The fair is a special event that comes only once a year. However, the transitory nature of the fair enhances rather than dilutes its experience, for the fleeting nature of the sensory smorgasbord encourages participants to soak it all in at once. Overabundance, whether of cheese curds, hogs, or tractors, encourages indulgence. Fairgoers find themselves caught up in a boisterous arena of celebration. This condensation of expressive devices in a time when the audience is prepped for leisurely consumption magnifies their power to reinforce one another (Abrahams, 1982, p. 166).

*Place within the yearly cycle.* As important as these fleeting experiences are, it is the setting of the fair—and fairtime insights—in meaningful relation to the rest of the year that reinforces its significance as an educational event. The extended late summer weekend of the fair is a cyclical renewal. Just as the fair displays the fruits of the summer’s labors, it also showcases the maturing of each generation. As a reflection of community vitality, each fair illustrates how ready succeeding generations are to assume valued roles within the community. Conversely, as a reflection of divisions within the community, the fair highlights residents’ propensity to detach and distance themselves from their hometowns.

As an event that happens only once a year, the county fair presents itself as an important opportunity to infuse money and energy back into the community. In a celebration of this size, many hands are needed. Service clubs are hired to work at the Bauer County Fair based on the local use that they intend for their fairtime earnings. Whether paying for the annual town Christmas lighting or sponsoring a children’s recreation program, groups must reinvest the money. “We don’t hire people who don’t put the money back in,” declared a fair officer. Further, by acting on their commitment to help out their “neighbors,” participants affirm valued roles for themselves and their civic groups in the larger community. Connections and alliances are made that can facilitate long-term regional development efforts. Aronoff (1993), in a study of rural Michigan communities, found that “celebrations offer residents a low-risk area in which to develop a region-wide identity, social relationships, and organizational linkages that subsequently become available as resources for direct economic planning” (p. 3).

*Creating the public.* The fair unites on one festival grounds the creative endeavors and business enterprises of the various constituent communities that make up the

county. People come from the scattered townships and villages that in earlier times competed for resources, or today, are divided by high school sports rivalries. At the fair they come together as a county, an entity that transcends one sense of place or set of interests. In this way, the fairtime assemblage embodies an imagined community (Anderson, 1983).

The familiar and largely known script of the county fair enables participants to concentrate on its socially creative dimensions. Geertz (1973) emphasizes that such celebratory and evocative cultural performances are, like the Balinese cockfights that he describes, “stories people tell about themselves” (p. 448). Collective representations make the invisible visible (Durkheim, 1915), displaying through art and artifact who we are, e.g., modern pioneers on a nearly-lost frontier. Community fairs, as integrative dramatizations that emphasize things held in common, can offer participants more than the literal truth, presenting—in essence, creating—a unified sense of place even when there inherently is none (Lavenda, 1983).

*Incorporation.* The gathering aspect of festival integrates the individual, if only for a short time, into a larger collectivity that transcends both the individual and the era. By joining in the annual festival, the young person can be part of something that his or her parents and peers may also have experienced and remember. When the act of taking part in the celebration is infused with a religious or moral dimension, it takes on an added level of meaning to those who subscribe to the celebrated ideology.

Sometimes becoming a communicant member requires formal induction, and if so, rituals of incorporation may be embedded within a highly prominent celebration. Rites of passage exemplify the ritualistic incorporation of youth into adult worlds. Van Gennep (1960) describes these rites as liminal phases, literally crossing of the threshold between one stage and the next. As Bettelheim (1954) noted, initiation ceremonies attempt to quell anxieties about (adult) roles by contextualizing the initiation within a recurring and ritualized celebration of maturity. Such declarations gain added power by their public nature. Therefore, these rites of passage for youth are conducted before the assembled crowds. Through their participation, both participant and spectator are strengthened in their commitment to the lifeways so vividly represented as well as the moral imperatives that underlie these lifeways. After being set apart during the rite, they are reincorporated into the adult or high status group with enhanced standing.

*The importance of play.* People continue to come to the fair year after year, “ ’cause it’s fun!” However frivolous and trivial fairtime activities may appear on the surface, the aspect of play inherent in the fair is a particularly potent form of education. Play is that which is construed to have no serious meaning yet is infused with meaning (Kridel, 1980). Fairs combine many kinds of play:

storytelling between exhibitors and spectators, public speeches, competitions of various kinds, races, and contests. Play is integrative; through games we model valued traits (e.g., of stealth and strategy) and partake in a personally engaging kind of moral education (Kridel, 1980). In a setting where the rules are explicit and provide safe bounds of play, the challenge of personal accomplishment comes to the fore. Play is purposeful.

The playful, or ludic, aspect of festival gains its evocative power partly through inversion. That is, festivals invert the prescribed social order; the private becomes the public, abstinence becomes indulgence, the street becomes the home (Marcus, 1986; Raphael, 1976; Turner, 1982). It is a "time out of time" (Falassi, 1987) where normal social relationships are suspended. Those who hold power or social status are participant-observers just like everyone else, although sometimes, for the enjoyment of that same crowd, they may become dunk tank victims or dressed-up caricature figures. Senators converse freely with those represented in the leveling forum of the fair. In a like manner, youth, arguably maintained as marginal members of their home communities, take center stage at the county fair.

Play is also highly creative. Play infuses festival with ironic juxtapositions that call for consideration and knots of images that provoke disentangling. The fair provides a rich forum for creating new understandings and trying out innovative modes of expression. For example, polka bands may revive forms of musical expression from the ethnic heritage while combining old tunes with new lyrics. The risks of failure are few and the public rewards for success are numerous. Explicit encouragement of risk-taking can lead to innovation, whether that leads to a breakthrough in using a particular medium or simply in an individual trying something entirely new for the first time.

In the carnival-like freedom of the fair, mirth can become a political tool, used by the oppressed (Marcus, 1986; Scott, 1990) to critique the political order and create themselves anew as powerful agents. In the festive world of carnival, creative ambiguity provides space for the expression of forbidden thoughts and desires. In the relatively low risk setting of the fair, dissatisfaction with traditional (sex) roles and privileges or social hierarchies can be more openly voiced. Actions that move beyond those deemed gender-appropriate can be taken. Tensions can be expressed and frustrations diffused through the socially sanctioned safety-valves of satire and jokes.

But such serious play can also lead to syntheses of disparate elements, the trying on of new and more powerful roles, and the dramatization of new identities. Those same satires and jokes define new kinds of insidership and a sense of corporate identity. It is this kind of reflective citizenship that Dewey considered essential for a community of life-long learners. Durkheim posited that social formations give rise to symbolic expressions (1915). But in the transient,

loosely structured modern world, the opposite may be equally true. Social solidarity may arise through symbols; we are a "fair family" who shares activities, affinities, and interests. Identities enacted in celebrations can provide nodes of identification that then serve as starting points for more finely articulated organizational myths that constitute certain groups in opposition to or contrast with others. Thus, for example, urban street fests such as Juneteenth, by reconstituting the celebrants in relation to the external world, can contribute to a change in political relations between minority and majority groups.

*Intensification.* Celebrations like the county fair intensify understanding of and commitment to rural lifeways. This is accomplished first by bringing to consciousness those organizing and synthesizing elements of the culture that continue to distinguish country life. One critical way that this is accomplished is by dislocation, the contrasting or setting out of order (Douglas, 1966). At fairtime, the accouterments of personal lifeways are laid out for all to see. Thus, by displaying a cow and a milking stall outside of a barn, by arraying clothes outside of private closets, by presenting a curd culler separate from its operational function as a tool in a cheese factory, they become evocative symbols of activities pursued elsewhere. Objects are seen in new light: A saw blade becomes a thing to be painted upon, abstracted as an art object.

A second kind of intensification is the embodiment of core ideas through displays. The overflowing exhibit halls of the county fair present a cornucopia of symbols of increase (Abrahams, 1982), the harvest of the "fruits of enterprise." One end of the Bauer County fairgrounds is reserved for a larger-than-life exhibition of the grand machinery of progress—the combines, tractors, feeders, and other tools that make impressive harvests possible.

A third way that participants' awareness is enhanced is through exaggeration and explicit statements of standards. Just as the exaggerated features of the Ndembu initiation masks provocatively display relevant personal attributes (Turner, 1967, p. 103), explicit comments by judges in fairtime judging events make clear the rules, standards, and organizing principles that novices are expected to learn.

### Methodology

The present study builds on five rounds of research at this site, and draws on more than a decade of participation in county fairs in Wisconsin. The Bauer County Fair was selected for closer investigation because of its apparent success and resiliency in a county that is continuing to undergo significant economic and social shifts. An additional advantage to this site was my familiarity with the region and acquaintance with several fair officers and residents of the county. These personal contacts enabled me to work in a highly diverse array of participant-observer roles. I served

in such capacities as a judge's assistant, fair tag distributor, grandstand "handyman," errand runner, cage assembler, hawker, county extension survey distributor, and dunk-tank victim.

Structured and semistructured interviews formed the core of data for this analysis. Given the emphasis on youth learning, the core interviews focused on fair participants aged 7 to 18 and their families. My main sample comprised several dozen young exhibitors of different ages, sexes, and exhibitor categories with whom I met either alone or in groups. I interviewed many of these young people over subsequent years. Whenever possible, I interviewed one or more of their parents.

Additional interviews supplemented these meetings. A series of semistructured interviews was conducted with those with core responsibilities for running the fair: the officers, major event judges, and board members. I also conducted interviews with prominent actors, including the fair royalty ("Fairest of the Fair,") judges, extension agents, and the carnival operator, whose family has come to this fair for years. These interviews were repeated at least twice during the course of the 5 years with the individual in those positions to test for reliability as well as change over time. In addition, I conducted Expressive Autobiographic Interviews (Spindler, 1970) with senior fairgoers who were able to reflect on changes and consistencies in the fair during their lifetimes. Finally, a sample of non-exhibiting fairgoers stratified by age, gender, and family status were polled to ascertain general attitudes toward participation in the fair.

These contacts were complemented by observations of large-group entertainment, religious, and judging events. As the emphasis is on intergenerational teaching and the translation of values and relationships, I paid special attention to the interaction of people from several generations. I particularly looked at key events that formally express standards and expectations for youth, such as judging and the Junior Livestock Auction. The emerging analyses were triangulated with follow-up interviews with key actors and with those working behind the scenes.

Beginning in the 2nd year of the project, I emphasized building photographic and video portfolios of the events, people, and social groupings that comprise the fair. I analyzed patterns of interactions, as well as the assumptions and acknowledgments that participants expressed. Using these portfolios, I gave a multimedia presentation at the annual Fair Appreciation Banquet and received useful critique that shaped the last round of data gathering. The presentation, as well as the permanent photography exhibit that was displayed in the fair office at fair time, also served as the vehicle for fairgoers' personal reflection and informal commentary that frequently spilled over into more formal interviews.

For context, I used fair-related documents from the Smithsonian Museum of American Folklife, the Wiscon-

sin State Historical Society, statewide fair participation and revenue records, the county library, town archives, and Fair Board minutes. Officers and county residents who became interested in my work collected the local newspapers, even digging back into newspaper microfiche to retrieve past documentation. A particularly rich resource was a history of the fair written by a past president (Gasch, 1988). This, coupled with Bauer County Fair premium books dating back to 1921, provided important information about how the fair advertised itself to its prospective constituents. Boxes of pictures, ribbons, and other personal memorabilia that informants drew out of closets and archives also enriched the data.

Finally, in the time between the annual Wisconsin fairs, I visited fairs in large metropolitan, suburban, and rural areas for comparative purposes. I participated in local as well as state-level celebrations in California, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and Minnesota. Many of these visits included semistructured interviews with fair officials and informal conversations with participants.

An important element in this structuralist research program is the primary emphasis on participant and insider perspectives. Several long-term trends in fair participation underscore this as an appropriate focus. First, the continued popularity of this particular fair is reflected in the high proportion of residents who come. Second, most people attend the fair again and again, setting aside that weekend just to spend time at the fair. For many respondents, it was nearly inconceivable to imagine that the fair might not come again every year, for as one senior fairgoer stated, "It's a part of my life." Third, fairgoers collectively construct the meaning of the fair. Whether exhibitor, grandstand fan, or officer, their paths inevitably cross on the small fairgrounds. Thus, because of their compact distribution, it was possible to draw a diverse subsample from fairgoers, both youth and adult.

## Findings

The influence of the fair extends far past the specific weekend when it takes place. The fair is multidimensional, reaching back to sustain activities that have been central to local lifeways, reaching out to incorporate each succeeding generation, and reaching forward to stretch participants' horizons. Two major aspects of the fair emerged from the data, celebrations of learning that intensify understanding of and commitment to rural lifeways and celebrations of belonging that incorporate members of the younger generations into community networks. In the next two major sections of this article I have distilled out the two fundamental elements that young fairgoers find most meaningful in their experiences at the Bauer County Fair: learning and belonging.

### Learning

The fair provides a unique public forum for celebrating achievement and inspiring excellence. It is a time to focus on the positive. It may be seen as a complement to the schools, strategically providing educational elements that are not highlighted in the standardized curriculum. It also provides a fundamentally different, playful forum in which young people are encouraged to take risks and to explore roles. For many, the fair provides an unduplicated opportunity that they eagerly anticipate. When surveyed, the general consensus among young exhibitors was that “the fair gives you something to work for.”

In this section, I present the most salient aspects of young participants’ fairtime learning experiences. I draw primarily on numerous examples from face-to-face judging events and showmanship classes—the preeminent venues for youth to display their growing skills and understandings.

*The public aspect of the fair.* When asked to reflect on how participating in the fair compared to completing work at school, young exhibitors most frequently mentioned the highly visible nature of the fair. A major purpose of the Bauer County Fair is publicly recognizing and collectively celebrating achievement by youth. When awards are bestowed in judging events, the winners’ names are announced along with their parents’ names. And after the “junior fair” exhibits have been judged, the exhibitors’ names are revealed and displayed on tags attached to the project. Large oak cases, crafted in memorial to former fair participants, display what youth have learned through their gun safety projects, model airplanes, computer programs, house plants, and baked goods. “People get to see what you do” stated Ryan, contrasting work done for the fair with schoolwork “that maybe the teacher reads and nobody else.” “At the fair, you receive credit for it,” added Hannah.

People of all ages can be seen wandering the exhibit halls, looking at the displays, and looking for projects done by their neighbors, students, church members, friends, and rivals. “Maybe somebody will appreciate it, said Darrin hopefully, referring to his photography display. A dedicated few carry notebooks to record who earned what prize, and to note down judges’ comments for future reference. A fair officer perhaps put it best:

They make something that’s really special and then they have all these people coming through and admiring it and they see the name—so and so made this. And if this youngster who made it is just walking through and hears that, you have to have a needle and thread to sew his button back on! (laughing). He popped his button off his shirt !!

Recognition of their efforts was a recurring theme to young people’s stories of why they brought things to the fair. In addition to public recognition, “junior exhibitors” earn cash rewards depending on the ribbon that they are awarded. The symbolic importance of this money far outweighs the actual amount earned. In 1991, youth earned a mean of \$12.62 for their several projects, a net income that seldom covers the cost of completing even one item. However, it was the opportunity to “get extra money off it” that they had earned themselves that impressed these young people. Most had grand plans for their fair checks. Respondents planned to put it towards fashionable sports shoes, a bike, clothes, a 14-foot trampoline, or as Stacey said, excitedly realizing how much her check might be, “roller blades—or maybe a pack of gum.”

*Trying new roles and modes of expression.* Exhibits are harvested from the kitchen, field, farm, and basement workshop. They also come directly from the schoolroom, as at the Bauer County Fair most of the elementary schools still each fill a group booth with selected dioramas, posters, and the like. There are numerous categories for exhibits at this fair. Fruit growing, computer, child development, woodworking, and conservation studies projects are, at their best, the culmination of a year-long process of learning from others and about oneself. Conversely, they may also represent a crash course in getting a project done with just a few days to go before the fair. “The fair makes you get it done” admitted Karl.

Young people are encouraged to try out new areas, especially those that are not offered in their rural schools, parochial schools, or through home schooling. Eric, who had completed a significant woodworking project, said that through 4-H he was able to seek out teachers to show him the craft because his high school only offered one cabinet making class, and he would have to wait 2 years yet to take it. The number and diversity of projects that youth bring testify to their diverse interests. In 1991, 891 Bauer County kids prepared 5,473 exhibits, or a mean of 6 apiece. Some really run with the opportunities offered by the fair. Kristin finished 41 exhibits, explaining simply, “I like to do crafts.”

At the voluntary, free-wheeling fair, young people can try on new activities and explore parts of themselves that they or their peers may not deem appropriate in other settings. At the fair, they can push back boundaries that they would be more reluctant to test in the more highly circumscribed and regulated social worlds of Bauer County’s small rural high schools. Two examples of different kinds of exploration illustrate this point. First, junior class exhibitors are less constrained by notions of gender appropriate exhibit categories than the adults, who show more rigidly circumscribed patterns of division by gender in the open (adult) classes. A young man who has sewn clothes and a horse blanket stated his reason for wanting to produce a show shirt himself, “ ’cause in the store it’s \$40-\$50, and I can

make it for less." A second kind of stereotype that exhibitors push back was described by Jennifer. She and her sister brought woodworking, goats, sheep, beef, hogs, clothes, moccasins, a leather dog collar, and more. Her interest in these things was allowed free and unabashed expression at the fair. "In school," Jennifer explained, "they'd make fun of you. They don't know me as anything but a sports jock." But at the fair, these interests are validated: "You can show off to everyone your stuff. 4-H is not a bunch of farmers. There are some regular people—city kids."

*Judges as encouraging experts.* The most influential fairtime teachers are the judges who have been hired to evaluate the youth exhibits. Face-to-face judging of youth exhibits has become the dominant form of interaction at the Bauer County Fair. Five years ago, a major shift was made towards face-to-face meetings between the judge and the exhibitor in response to the overwhelmingly positive response by parents and young people. It now fills the Saturday on the weekend before the fair.

In these specially designated youth classes, the judges make explicit statements about standards, highlighting and exaggerating desired qualities so that they are more apparent to the novice. Aspects of accomplishments are pointed out the fairtime student. Seventeen-year-old Mike said, "It's more fun at the fair - you learn more. You know you did a good job, the judge congratulated you, told you what you did right. At school it's just 'Good job.'" Judges also offer constructive criticism. Rob, also seventeen and an experienced exhibitor, stated "in face-to-face you learn from your mistakes, how to be judged, how to be criticized versus just look for praise." However, this mentoring relationship only works if the judge is perceived to be unbiased, fair, and if her or his standards are consistent with past expectations. Unfair judging can become the grounds for public outcry. The second year of the study, parents complained about arbitrary standards and criteria because a judge who simply did not like birds ranked exhibits that used or depicted birds lower than others.

As representatives of "expert" communities, judges use the pronoun "we" in ways that indicate to the novices that there is some sort of established body of experts who set the criteria with which they are being judged. "We like to see a straight hem" and "If we can't see the seams [on the finished ceramic piece] that's a very good job." This inclusive pronoun is extended to more accomplished exhibitors, subtly bringing them into the guild of master crafters. The welcome, "We have five pieces here" indicates that, together, the judge and exhibitor are going to assess the item. Congratulating an advanced exhibitor on a thorough job, the judge said, "we sure need to work hard to get it this good," adding that "when we put a second coat (on ceramics), we skilled artists need to be careful about drying times." After a lesson to an older exhibitor on a better way to mat a

charcoal drawing, the judge told him, "you be the expert now and go teach your leader."

Just as important as conveying standards, the judges interact to build self-esteem in the exhibitors. Their comments relay that the judges believe that youth have within them the capacity for excellence, and "they want your very best work to come through" at fairtime. Mike added that he was proud of what he had selected to bring to the fair, "It was fun to do and challenging and it took a while. You can pick out your best and bring it to the fair." The element of personal challenge was a repeated theme with exhibitors of all ages. "Just knowing that I can" and "just that I completed it was good" illustrate this point of pride. Carrie added that, "At school you get a grade—you do it for the teacher. At the fair you do it for yourself." Judges encourage personal ownership of both the product and the effort, recognizing both in their decision to award a certain ribbon. One judge frequently asked often amazed exhibitors, "What do you like about it?" to which a plucky young man responded candidly, "I deserve a first 'cause like it and I'm proud of it!" Judges want their students to claim their work, and as one prodded, "sign it—so that when you're rich and famous people will know when you did it."

Although technical skill is clearly emphasized, judges also recognize progress towards a goal as an achievement worthy in and of itself. Comments representative of this kind of approach include "I'd really like to give you a first [prize], but maybe next year, eh?" Another judge, handing out a red (that denotes second place), said that this is "'cause you're going to know how to do it better next time." Summing up, a judge said to a disheartened recipient of a white (third place) ribbon, "don't quit, just do it better."

*Linking instrumental competencies with underlying values.* Face-to-face judging events are the most prominent times for youth to talk explicitly about what they are learning. In often animated interactions, the judges ask pointed questions of exhibitors that bring to consciousness the values underlying fine workmanship and the production of specific objects. They ask questions that probe exhibitors' understandings of, for example, why a certain technique was used, where their pattern or idea came from, what it took to raise a certain vegetable, why the components of their flower arrangement were chosen, and so forth. Through the explanations that youth give about why they made an object or what the intended use is, young people are involved in the vital process of affirming the cultural values that underlie the production of such items and that continue to make them relevant to modern life in the Hinterland (Spindler & Spindler, 1990). They actively link skills learned with recognition of the aesthetic choices, affinities, and interpersonal relationships that endow their exhibits with personal meaning. Afterwards in individual interviews with exhibitors after judging, I asked them to further elaborate on their projects.



Since multiple dimensions of the project are equally important, ribbons recognize artistic skill and expression as well as the conditions under which the item was produced. The exhibitor's understanding or intentions when creating an object are also taken into account. Referring to an unorthodox paint job on a model car, a judge stated, "I won't judge an item down if I think that's what he wanted, that's the way he prefers it." Through these educational events, young exhibitors intensify their understandings of and commitments to the lifeways that make their projects meaningful. In the process, they may also come to a reassessment of their own future roles (e.g., as crafters or workers).

Building on the work of Douglas (1966), Hall (1977), Toelken (1979), and Seeger (1966), Moore outlines a framework for interpreting the production of cultural items (1989). Moore's model depicts three "Circles of Tradition," umbrella categories under which cultural items can be placed. These categories include the Integrated Tradition, the Perceived Tradition, and the Celebrated Tradition. Like the judges above, these categories take into account form, the mode of production of an object, the relevant aesthetic standards, the creator's intended use, personal relevance, and the diverse meanings that the object evokes and represents. Exploring how these aspects of exhibitors' projects are linked together is key to understanding the multivalent meanings that the projects have for them. This is true not only for the meanings that exhibits take on though their dislocated exhibition at the fair, but also for the meanings that the former exhibits have when they are reintegrated with the personal context from which the objects or animals originated.

Projects that exemplify an Integrated Tradition focus on meaning. To illustrate how a particular project can be classified, it is useful to look at the example of birdhouses. Perennial fair-time favorites, a birdhouse could belong in any of the Circles of Tradition. However, an example of a birdhouse that falls in this first category is Jeremy's easily recognizable marten house. Because they are integral parts of their surroundings, items in this circle reflect common ideas about aesthetics and form, usually falling within a conservative genre of decoration, shape, size, color, and material. Therefore, Jeremy explained to the judge, it seemed obvious to him to build his white apartment birdhouse in the classic, two-story style and to set it upon a tall pole. In this way, it was clearly recognizable to both Jeremy and the judge, and ultimately to his family, as a marten house. In addition, items in this circle are infused with meaning through the place that the items have in the life and work cycles of an individual or family. Jeremy's home for the mosquito-eating martens is valued because of the importance of encouraging these birds to nest at his parent's rural farmstead. Further, items in this circle express a degree of continuity with the past: Jeremy felt that he should

replace the old marten house with a new one, "because we've always had one."

Other projects illustrate additional aspects of this first circle. Traditional symbolic representations are often incorporated into the design of items intended for ritual or holiday use. Micah's Christmas tree skirt, and Elizabeth's white, crocheted Christening gown for her new baby brother each have easily recognized designs integrated into them. In this circle, the intended use is significant. Often items are prepared as gifts for a family member or friend (e.g., a wagon for a younger sibling or a bird feeder for an aged neighbor in a nursing home). The gift may be for the family to use as a unit, as in a gunrack for the family room or a dinner napkin holder for the table. Further, an item's meaning is central to the existence of an object. Items made seem to be obvious choices, necessary provisions for roles and activities that young people see themselves having now and/or in the future. Thus Melissa decided to build a cedar-lined hope chest where she plans to gather a trousseau of linens in preparation for her own household. Finally, items can express a sense of spiritual community. Luther, who told an engaging story about how he came to make a shelf out of "Grandpa's wood," and Aaron, who exhibited a cutting from "Dad's roses," both derived great pride from the connections that their projects engender.

Projects in the Perceived Tradition focus on function. A birdhouse in this circle need not necessarily conform to highly codified aesthetic standards. Rather, the purposes that it serves are paramount. Rachel's popsicle stick birdhouse provides her not only with a way of attracting and providing for birds in the backyard, but also reinforces her relationship with the project leader who helped her construct it. Forms are more fluid in this circle. Young artists can meld ideas and themes, making Bart Simpson the subject of an oil painting or a Mighty Morphin Power Ranger the key figure on a leather working project.

More important than particular form is the mode of production and the personal relevance of an item. In a similar way, David's large doghouse makes use of aluminum siding salvaged from his Dad's home renovation project. A part of David's pride in telling the story of how it came to be built is derived from knowing that he made good use of scraps that would have been wasted if they had not been recycled in such a clever way. Likewise, in the exquisitely crafted woodworking storage bench that Elise brought, workmanship is dovetailed with enhanced self-sufficiency, the value that the bench embodies. Echoing local values of self-reliance, building for the future, and pragmatism, the judge asks her how her grandchildren will use her storage bench and why her creation is better than one bought in a store. The idea that "sometime in your life you're going to have to grab a hammer and nails and a saw fix something" infuses this project with significance.

Perceived tradition projects can proclaim affiliation, as Mary Katherine's ceramic horse proclaims her love of horses, even though she now lives in the suburbs and cannot have one of her own. Completion of projects enable young people to identify with a community of people they may have seldom interacted with, as Kyle's rocketry exhibit prompted him to say, "I'm going to be an astronaut." The personal relevance of an item may be discovered en route. Teenage Scott said he not only "learned that I had the talent of refinishing," but now sees it as a likely and enjoyable complement to his anticipated career as an engineer. Scott found that working as an artist enriched his life and made him feel like he belonged to a small cadre of accomplished refinishers.

Projects in the Celebrated Tradition focus on form. Two birdhouses were shown at the latest round of the fair that exemplify objects in this circle. They were made out of worn cowboy boots that had holes cut into the fronts. Old Wisconsin license plates formed the bent roofs, and the whole thing was suspended by a loop of barbed wire. These birdhouses are not as functional as they are decorative or provocative. Items in this circle are usually a self-conscious pursuit, one that attempts to use new forms, materials, or modes of production to create an item as well as to create conversation. Forms may be chosen because they are pleasing and the act of creating them is simply fun. Strange and exotic vegetables cultivated to take on wild proportions, new colors, and grotesque shapes fill this bill. The rejection of convention, whether in who makes an item or what it is made out of, provide a commentary on traditional roles and styles.

Especially when condensation symbols become the objects of such artistic play, they gain renewed stature at the same time that they may be caricatured. In this self-proclaimed "Milk Vein of the World," just such a condensation symbol is the Holstein cow. Jason's project illustrates the unconventional use of this common cultural icon. He came up to the judge with a three-foot tall piece of plywood that had been cut out and painted to depict a dancing Holstein cow. It has reflectors in its eyes; when the cut out is staked alongside the entrance to his driveway, it serves to demarcate an entrance that easily disappears among the rolling landscape as twilight approaches. In this way the family can also display to passers-by that they identify with this local icon.

Items in this last circle may be significant for the creator because they proclaim affiliation with a community or heritage that is not necessarily related to the person's own background, ethnic group, or social roles. Projects may harken back to a different time or be a revival of an art. For example, Sandy made jam, not because it was an essential part of preparing for winter, but because she wanted to try it and enjoy an indulgence of "homemade," rather than the kind she usually found in the store.

*Learning to present oneself.* Participating in the fair provides a space for young people to develop abilities that could be considerable assets in the future. In addition to concurrently gaining skills in the production of objects and insight into the values that underlie their acquisition, young exhibitors also are encouraged to develop themselves as public actors. Fair events provide a hands-on education in gaining confidence in relating to the public, learning about competing fairly, and practicing presenting themselves in public arenas. These highly transferable abilities will serve young people well in whatever fields they ultimately enter.

First, the fair brings together people from diverse backgrounds who often harbor divergent, if not conflicting, views. Young people, especially those who spend long hours keeping watch over their animals in the barns, frequently become engaged in casual conversations with the fairgoers who wander through these areas. "People ask questions about goats. Some people want to learn," said Stacey, wrestling with several great kids eager for their evening meal.

Other kinds of interactions also are possible in the open forum of the fair. Over the course of this study, there was an increase in tensions from animal rights activists who saw this fair, like others in the region, as a particularly opportune moment to confront young people, carnival operators, and fair officers with their concerns about cruelty to animals and the politics of carnivorousness. These activists were usually cast as meddling outsiders who come to agitate and upset the kids unduly. In response, parents and leaders stressed to young exhibitors that they were wrong about meat consumption and encouraged kids to report any "troublemakers." But it most often fell on youth themselves to represent themselves and to defend their activities, stressing that they have been taught about the importance of keeping an animal clean, cool, comfortable and consistently well-fed.

Friendly competition, the second transferable skill, is seen as an important means through which talents are honed and skill displayed to one's peers. An important element of competition is instruction in "the Fair way" of relating. An officer stated that at the fair:

You're participating against your friend—you've got that fight to exceed, to win, but yet when that [exhibiting] class is over you're still all friends. It teaches them good sportsmanship, citizenship, gives them responsibility. I guess that's why it's survived.

Good sportsmanship in particular is an essential skill that is reinforced in subtle and explicit ways. A young man is told that no matter how tense things get in the ring, a good neighbor will sit "as friends" with others in the evening. In addition, competing fairly means deferring to

(adult) authority. Later, this young exhibitor's disappointment with his ranking is countered with a statement reinforcing the authority of the judge and the importance of deference to adults' greater experience.

The third transferable skill, showmanship, is cultivated through an entire set of exhibit categories designed specifically for this purpose. The goal of these classes is not to judge the exhibit, but how well the exhibitors conduct themselves and present their dress, sow, or public speech. Showmanship prizes recognize effort, confidence, and poise, things that are not so easy. As Lissa said, "it's hard to look elegant and lead a sheep at the same time."

Parents were more likely than youth to emphasize the value of working for showmanship. A father who had grown, alongside his children, in his fair involvement from uninterested parent to project leader to barn superintendent emphasized the common view that it was important to "just get out there and do it." In addition, he felt that the showmanship categories were a place where those children who came from hobby farms or whose parents did not invest in high price breeding stock could have an equal footing. This suggests that with the growing shift away from primary incomes from farming, the importance of categories that are attractive to nonfarm families (e.g., pet animals or hobby farming) may grow in importance. A mother of several exhibitors commented that she felt showmanship ribbons were perhaps more telling of the child's effort:

You can buy an animal or you can raise an animal, I guess, and some people like to buy a good quality animal . . . but my kids work for showmanship. Showmanship is on the kid, how you clean the animal and how you present it and when, ah!, they come home with a showmanship [ribbon], I don't care a what, it makes me feel darn good!

[Q: What does a showmanship ribbon mean to you?]

That they were working on it, and they wanted it hard enough that they wanted to show the people that they knew how to do it and that they were the best there—that's what I like. (Recounts how well her offspring have done.) I know they did their best, even if they might not have come home with a trophy, I know they did their best, and I'm proud of that fact. (Tells how in their home all of the fair awards are displayed on equal footing with sports trophies.)

### *Belonging*

The Bauer County Fair also provides young people and those who wish to invest in youth opportunities to work

together. Teens and even elementary age kids can take on service and leadership roles at the fair, some of which are seldom otherwise offered to them because of their age or background. But at a small, local fair people need to pull together; there is the potential for each person to find a niche where her or his services are needed. By being a meaningful part of a long established festival, young participants gain a sense of belonging and enhanced perspective about where they might fit in as adults. In this section I present several examples of the ways that youth are brought into community work through the fair and the discourse about volunteerism and service that accompanies such participation. Then, to illustrate how succeeding generations are incorporated into the *communitas* (Turner, 1969), I highlight two annual celebrations of belonging: (a) the Junior Livestock Auction, which incorporates youth into professional networks, and (b) the Sunday church service, which reminds fairgoers that they are inherently part of a larger, moral occupational community.

*Learning about the work of building community.* Participation is not limited to those who bring exhibits; there are many work roles for people of different generations to fill. Volunteerism has long been the cornerstone of the fair. Today, as in the past, a veritable legion of superintendents, recorders, ticket takers, taggers, breakfast servers, and car parkers keep the fair running smoothly. Often these teams are composed of multiage groups or families.

Impromptu work groups are a common scene at a small fair; everyone has to pull together to make events happen. Late one night a volunteer crew of officers, their relatives, and other fairgoers disassembled the main stage, a sturdy platform with a backdrop and lighting frame that was built upon three hay wagons. The next morning, these wagons would be moved to the wooded glen along the river that bounds the fairgrounds and the stage rebuilt for a different band's show the next night. A young conscript commented that he felt appreciated because, "Everyone is important, everyone has a contribution to make. Here you're not among strangers—you know people." This aspect of familiarity was important to him, because "you can work better together." Becoming known as someone whom people can call upon is important in a *Gemeinschaft*—a social system based on personal relationships—whereas it is less crucial in a *Gesellschaft*—which is more typical in transient, urban settings and where contractual relations are the basis for relationships between people.

Those who volunteer their materials, as well as those who give of their time and energy, reinforce their sense of belonging, feelings that can strengthen and deepen over their lifetimes. Under signs that read "Mueller Memorial Building" or "Dedicated to the Memory of Peter Herman, Fair Officer and 4-H leader for 43 years," young people see their contributions as a continuous line from those made by their foreparents, whether these are literal kin or not.

Metaphors of blood and family underscore these understandings. By helping, “the fair gets in your blood.” Many of those who have grown into leadership roles, particularly the fair officers who are responsible for day-to-day operations “grew up with the fair.” Officers felt that they were now full members of the “fair family.”

There are many service roles available. Young people become part of teams that staff food booths, keep watch in the barns at night, help in the racetrack pit, or work on the grounds. A teenage boy whose family had not traditionally been involved with the fair but who became a core member of the all-male maintenance squad through a summer groundskeeping job, stated; “I like working up here and knowing that I did something that everyone’s going to see. I like helping out.” A youth leader stated that working at such a public-supported event provides young workers with a larger sense of belonging. Enthusiastically reflecting on her own positive experiences, she felt that it gives young people

a sense of community work. . . . When these kids come here they come from all areas of the county. They all become friends, working side by side. I think that ability, say, “I’m from Dunwiede” or “I’m from Carver,” but we can all work together to make this fair grow, and maybe make our county grow, and make our state be better, you know, just by working like that . . .

By working and playing together, fairgoers collectively construct the meaning of what it means to belong to a community. A fair officer underscored the importance of a celebratory context in which to nurture desired character traits: “If we can teach that to these kids in a fun way with other youngsters at their age, we’re just building a character for this child for all the years that he’s going to be on this earth.” For example, the importance of personal responsibility, the value of working collaboratively, and the importance of service in community life are all skills that young fair participants see modeled by adult leaders and teen leaders. A parent, taking her turn in the 4-H youth dairy bar and grill, stated that when working in multiage groups in the stand, youth learn more than just how to count change:

They learn the ability to wait on people and be happy and present themselves. That says “Hey, this is a nice county that we can be proud of.”

[Q: Why is that important?]

It’s important when you go to the 4-H stand and these kids rush up to you and ask, “Can I help

you?” And you do see the sense of “I really do want to help you, to do something for you.”

These encounters are two-way, as fairtime provides residents of the county with opportunities to see youth in action on a much larger scale than they would otherwise encounter. Negative images of youth are inverted, replaced at least temporarily by positive ones. It is a time set aside to celebrate the accomplishments of young people and to feel optimistic about the group whom event announcers constantly refer to as “our youth.” A newspaper reporter there to do the annual opening day coverage of the fair and several youth leaders concurred with an extension agent’s comment that fair provides a singular chance to see youth in positive roles:

Sometimes they say “Ah, gee the youth are going downhill.” I think that the county fair is a good example of seeing the youth in action, whether they are showing off, or modeling at the style review, whether they’re helping at the food stand or helping as an assistant to a superintendent. But seeing them in different roles—that’s important for not only the senior citizens, but also their parents, the adult volunteers they work with, and also their peers.

Another kind of inversion that takes place at the fair is “farm kids” becoming experts and insiders. Bauer County schools bring together students from a wide range of backgrounds, ranging from isolated rural to suburban. Sometimes chided by their nonfarming peers as “hicks,” fairtime is a safe space in which farm youth are among those given center stage. Fairgoers who do not live on farms, whether they be visitors from a nearby city or Bauer County residents, have the opportunity to see “real, live farm animals.” And they can see young people readily handling boars or cows and fielding fairgoers’ often naive questions about animals. The rural young person who is thus cast in the role of expert feels a degree of pride in competently performing a fascinating activity. The pleasure derived from having insider or expert knowledge, especially as compared to the sometimes condescending suburbanites, was reflected in the joke told by a teen leader. Chris recounted the oft-retold tale about the town kids “who’ll see a [brown] Guernsey and they say ‘Hey, Mom there’s a cow that gives chocolate milk!’ You have to educate them that all milk is white, the chocolate comes later.” The pleasure of the joke comes not from its truth in representing all nonfarm visitors, but in the telling of the tale among insiders.

*The junior livestock auction and professional networking.* The webs of relationship that are woven at the fair also serve to integrate young people into professional networks that can assist them in becoming full fledged, productive

members of the community. The junior livestock auction is the most notable example of how the fair offers young people an unduplicated means to become part of the county wide agribusiness network. Participants are launched on the way toward a life-long set of relationships that will be critical to their abilities to earn a living within the local set of farms, banks, industry, and businesses. In this rural area, business relations are significantly influenced by personal reputation and mutual respect. By participating as "real sellers," young people take the first steps toward becoming serious partners. Even if they do not choose to pursue careers in the region, or choose ones only peripherally related to this core network, the skills and recognition that they gain through the Auction will be assets. This event has no counterpart beyond the fair, so those who do not participate are at a disadvantage.

At the Auction, respected adults invest in youth, publicly supporting these future adult members of the extended community. Bankers, feed dealers, hair stylists, butchers, insurance agents, teachers, and more all eagerly lined up to register to bid. The eager spectators sat on bleachers along the gaily decorated center arena, leafing through programs that list the names of the exhibitors due to appear with their cattle, sheep, and pigs. Prospective bidders marked, at least by sight, the names belonging to the particular family farms they wish to support. "It's about business," a long-time bidder explained. They get ready to bid, fully aware that the prices are inflated to many times the market rate in order to reward youth for a job well done.

Each year, the public spectacle that accompanied the bidding drew a large crowd that grew to spill out of the metal-sided barn building. The names of the highest bidders on each animal were called out, and the runners up in that round of bidding were also acknowledged and thanked for their support. Trying to encourage even higher bids, the auctioneer called to the crowd, "Thanks for bidding! You're giving these kids a real education!" Youth who had earned the grand championship ribbons or who had earned showmanship awards were almost always awarded even higher premiums on their animals. In 1995, the Grand Prize sheep reaped \$884 for the young person, the top pig brought in \$1,719, and the best beef steer commanded \$2,835.

Auction events remained prominent past the Sunday afternoon when it was held. Buyers of the championship animals would later be spotlighted in the local paper, standing with the animal, the exhibitor, and the Fairest of the Fair. After the sale, these buyers not only took the animal, but also kept the championship banner and trophy for display in their places of business as a public announcement of their support. Almost immediately upon returning to the pens with their animal, the successful young sellers wrote the name of the buyer up on the entry sheets that hung above the pens, usually in the form of "Thank you, Bauer National Bank for buying my sheep." A few days after the

fair, the young sellers wrote letters of thanks to the buyers as well as to other close competitors in the auction.

For their part, the exhibiting youth can earn up to several hundred dollars for top flight market pigs and sheep, and well over a \$1,300 for a steer. In 1995, \$60,231 was invested in young people at the Auction. Especially for those exhibitors who are too young to find regular employment, the financial incentives to bring an animal to the fair and present it at the Auction can be compelling. The clear majority reported that they take the money and, after paying back their parents a prearranged amount for barn rental and feed, they put the rest in a college savings account.

The Auction also serves as a public rite of passage. Through the Auction young farmers must confront the essential dilemma in market animal production, the sale of the animal for meat. The presence of many youth selling off animals, the inflated financial rewards given to every participant, and the involvement of parents, their friends, and business associates all contribute to the pressures and rewards for youth to conform to adult expectations at the sale. Individual performance in the Auction show ring is highly ritualized and there are numerous adult guides on hand to assist. Young people do not have to guess how to behave; they simply wait their turn.

In addition to exhibiting the appropriate selling behavior in the show ring, this liminal stage requires that the young person successfully resolve the inherent conflict between attachment to and separation from the animal. They do so by emphasizing profit or "being grown-up" over emotional attachment to an animal that they may have spent considerable time training and grooming. Often coaching from an older exhibitor or parent is needed to reinforce the "correct" choice. Corrie, 10-year-old veteran of the lamb scene, said that she was a little worried about her younger sister who was going to be part of the Auction for the first time: "It bothered me a little when I was young, but it doesn't any more."

In another part of the main barn, a farmer cheerfully explained the purpose of the Auction as her daughter, Amanda, leaned against the huge pig as she fed him: "Tomorrow is the auction—that's when you are going to sell him." To Amanda's confused and somewhat anxiety-ridden gestures, she countered, "Remember, that's why we brought him. Hey, what are you going to do with your money?" Jason, 18, echoed the importance of financial incentives, recalling that it may be hard for young kids to let go of an animal that they've been working with all summer, "but once they see that check, it doesn't affect them too much." Nevertheless, some sellers do have tear-streaked, red faces as they approach the Auction ring, even those who are older and experienced in the Auction ritual.

*A moral occupational community and the church services.* In addition to learning about the social networks that are important to the smooth functioning of the county as a

unit, fairgoers, whether exhibiting or not, are drawn into a public dialogue about the importance of farming, especially family farming, in the life of the county. Although fewer and fewer young people of Bauer County will become full, or even part time, farmers, the occupation of farming, and in particular, dairying, command the place of honor at the Bauer County Fair.

This celebration explicitly proclaims the organizing myth of independent family dairy farming as the linchpin that secures converging parts of the community while still allowing them considerable individual flexibility. As the large wooden sign over the youth livestock pens reads, "Farming is Everybody's Bread and Butter." In years past, there have been booths glorifying the role that "Victory Farming" played in securing the future of a nation at war. Likewise, today political candidates hand out flyers extolling the importance of residents in the rural "Heartlands" in maintaining a strong national moral commitment to land, ecology, competitive production, and "family values."

Family images pop up again and again at this inter-generational festival. Above the overstuffed tables of vegetables, there is another wooden billboard that reads "Family Living," showing a logo with cupped hands and the slogan, "We've got the future in our hands." The annual fairs emphasize that the "roots" of agriculture are planted in youth, thus the banner in the background of the refrigerated cheese case proclaims hopefully, "Young Farmers Belong." These and other spotlighted displays at the fair reinforce agriculture as the critical juncture in the local concept of self. It is the one thing that all locals can participate in, even if only vicariously once a year at the county fair. For nonfarmers, the idea that there is a highly valued occupational pursuit common to many in the county provides a sense of distinctiveness, cohesion, and importance. The fact that this rural way of life is seen to be infused with a moral dimension and that, together, farmers and their customers comprise a moral occupational community, imbues it with an even greater sense of importance.

Nowhere is the concept of a moral occupational community expressed more clearly than at the ecumenical Christian church service held on Sunday morning in the grandstand or in a revival tent. Those who gather reflect the diversity of ages and roles represented on the fairgrounds, although their numbers may vary from barely a dozen one year to nearly eighty. Many of the worshipers have spent the night keeping watch in the barns or have arrived early to begin another long day at the fair.

The pastor welcomed them, stating, "We come from all corners of the county. We don't all know each other, but here we are called to be one people in God." They gather together to be reminded that the fair exists within a larger scheme of life and that their work is infused with a larger sense of purpose and importance, something larger than any single person (Warner, 1953).

As part of the readings, the officiate recounts to the assembled faithful the story of Genesis. Over the morning lowing of the cows that emanated from the barns next door, he quotes from memory:

According to our liking let him have dominion over the fish over the sea, and over the birds of the air and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.

The rightness of "man's" stewardship over animals and "his" responsibility to care for them properly is equated with fulfilling God's ultimate plan for humans. The fact that genetic engineering can be easily incorporated into the modern understanding of this mission is reflected in the following passage from the sermon:

I just want you to think of the creativity that's taking place in these [Bauer] County fairgrounds with all the animals and all of the displays of stock. The creation of things isn't done here, and the important thing for us to remember this morning that God involves us in the creation, we are co-workers with God. So the animals that are here being shown are probably quite different from those that started out on the day of creation. We have been capable of doing, God working together with us, for you see, God doesn't do everything for us. Like any parent realizes that to have a child grow up, gradually they have to take on more responsibility. You can't do it all for 'em. But as time passes they have to grow up in order to be the next generation.

It is interesting to note that the pastor draws parallels between the ways that Bauer County parents should provide opportunities for their children to grow, just as God, as The Father, is using the fairgrounds as a training place to show His children how to take on the responsibilities that they are expected to demonstrate as mature beings.

"God wants us to participate," the officiant repeats, exhorting those gathered to a life of service that begins with the most basic relationships with animals and extends to those fellow human beings needing food and shelter. As a nondenominational service, most of the chosen songs are patriotic ones that reflect civil religious values (e.g., *God Bless America* and *America the Beautiful*). Sitting high in the grandstand above real life "amber waves of grain," worshipers sing of the ways that God has blessed them through the bountiful harvests that "allow us to continue to feed the world." In this way, those gathered are once more reinforced in their sense of being a chosen people with a renewed sense of purpose and importance in the world.

### Conclusion

Participating in the Bauer County Fair is important to the young people who come to show their projects, wander through the barns and grandstand, work on the grounds, volunteer in the Dairy Bar, and just watch other people. Young fairgoers actively seek ways to make sense of the patterns that they see in motion around them. Through the kaleidoscope of the fair itself, young people are able to make the pieces fall into place.

While each person finds meaning in her or his own way through the individualized projects and activities that they have voluntarily sought out, several common elements unite their experiences. Opportunities to complete projects and then participate face-to-face in judging provide opportunities for young exhibitors to learn about their craft as well as themselves. In the process of articulating the values and relationships that give their projects personal meaning, such structured interactions with experts intensify participants' understandings of why they should strive to achieve. Further, because of the public nature of youth exhibits and showmanship classes, young people are recognized as they try out new roles and ways of presenting themselves. Youth also encounter settings in which they belong. Their labor, services, and barn supervision are necessary, not trivial, contributions to this small fair. More formalized experiences of belonging also provide transition points for maturing young people. These rituals and rites of passage incorporate young people both into the agribusiness networks vital to community prosperity as well as into the underlying Christian ideologies that inform local lifeways.

The Bauer County Fair should not be seen as a static re-enactment of obsolete cultural patterns, somehow surviving as a relic of a bygone age. Instead, participants of several generations are engaged in a hands-on dialogue, synthesizing symbols, roles, and images from overlapping spheres of culture. The Bauer County Fair provides a week set aside to integrate the often conflicting messages of rural life on a rapidly-expanding urban periphery. It has been this dynamic process of cultural transmission, the on-going modification of roles, and the creative adaptation of the cultural legacy which have sustained this particular county fair as a meaningful, intergenerational celebration.

### *Elements Critical to Their Experiences of Learning*

Purposeful, playful education infuses the Bauer County Fair with meaning. By providing competitions that bring together judges and youth in face-to-face interactions, fairs provide explicit encounters in which young people learn from teachers drawn from all walks of life. What young artists, gardeners, dog trainers, goat farmers, clothing style

review models, and woodworkers produce are given center stage at this small fair.

The fair offers unique judging and competitive forums for youth to learn the skills and values that underlie rural life in Bauer County. The county fair accentuates the positive, highlighting achievements in learning culturally valued pursuits. Young people are rewarded for accomplishments as well as progress toward mastery. Whichever Circle of Tradition their projects falls into, youth are encouraged to feel worthy of the challenge of completing their chosen project. Exhibitors are caught in the public eye, where they see themselves and their abilities reflected and critiqued. They are challenged to redefine who they are and what they are good at doing. It is important to note that for many of the young people whom I interviewed, this fair is the only place where they can safely explore projects otherwise proscribed them because of their age, gender, or "jock" image at school.

The fair provides many opportunities to explore new areas with few risks and, seen through the eyes of youth, relatively large rewards. It is illuminating to contrast how parents sum up what youth learn through the fair with how youth summarize their experiences. Parents felt, on average, that the most important reasons for encouraging their children to participate were enhanced self-esteem and the opportunities to take responsibility, learn how to help others, and meet other kids. Youth, on the other hand, were far and away the most motivated to exhibit by the prize money. This is a fascinating finding, because the average "fair check" barely covers the cost of completing even one project. Despite the fact that county fair premiums have remained nearly the same since the 1970s, young exhibitors reported that the fair check represented to them "money I earned myself." For those who participate in the Junior Livestock Auction, and thus for whom the premiums are substantially inflated, the money may at least partially appease whatever qualms they may have about selling off their animal for slaughter. Other common reasons cited by youth were a sense of accomplishment in meeting a challenge that they had sought out themselves and the opportunity to compete with others and thereby gain ideas about how to improve or what else they could try. These were followed by the opportunity that the fair offered to receive feedback from expert judges "who know something." The fact that most of those interviewed felt that schoolrooms did not provide them with the same kinds of learning experiences or rewards is significant.

At the same time that they reinforce hinterland values, competitions open up significant room for the inversion of roles, critique, recombination, innovation, and humor. Thus, while Jason's dancing Holstein may satirize this oddly-shaped creature, at the same time it reinforces the hegemony of the dairy cow as the preeminent condensation symbol of the county. Modes of expression can be used to

comment on rather than just glorify life in Bauer County. The fact that more drawings are of decrepit, weather-worn barns than there are of flower-filled active farmsteads, evokes in the person wandering through the exhibition hall a sense of loss, even decay, of a once dominant lifeway based on family farming.

### *Elements Critical to Their Experiences of Belonging*

The Bauer County Fair provides central rather than peripheral roles for young people. Instead of being incidental spectators, young participants come together with members of older generations in events that require their joint efforts in order to be successful. By enlisting in the legion of volunteers needed to run the fair, young workers can gain first-hand knowledge of the amount of work that it takes to make a fair like this happen year after year. Experiencing how they are treated and their contributions acknowledged or not provides insight into what kinds of positions they can anticipate as adults. By participating in the Auction and attending the on-site church services, young fairgoers encounter the norms and assumptions that provide the framework that has linked different elements of the county together for generations.

First, the fair offers young people meaningful ways to belong to a community of workers. Through experiential education working in the grandstand, in the barns, in the 4-H stand, and as traffic controllers in the parking areas, young people are invited to have fun while working. At the same time, they are learning more about what it means to do the work of building community. Those who take on leadership roles experience first-hand the challenges of motivating their peers, not to mention those older than themselves. Participants learn early in life the considerable contributions of time and energy that are the necessary prerequisites for small community celebrations dependent on the local labor supply. Successful fairtime experiences lead youth to see themselves as long-term participants in this cross-generational activity. They are welcome to return as adults, whether as exhibitors, as officers, or as volunteers. Conversely, perceptions that judging was been unfair, their efforts were not rewarded, or that their participation was discounted may lead to an early decision to disassociate with the fair as a time-consuming and irrelevant activity.

Through this animated celebration, fairgoers collectively construct what it means to be part of the *communitas*, both now and in the future. Participants gain a critical perspective on what it means for them as young men and women to live in an urbanizing, yet still rural county, that depends to a large extent on external markets and resources. Young participants are continually encouraged to reinterpret and reinforce their commitment to their hometown region and the underlying values that make belonging meaningful. Looking up to the young lady chosen as "Fair-

est of the Fair," they are asked to emulate someone who embodies the ideal characteristics valued by the local committee: scholarship, leadership, service, understanding of the regional economy, plans for higher education, etc. For many youth interviewed, the rural lifestyle that they envisioned in their future was not an "either-or" choice. Several indicated that they are searching for ways to combine the instrumental competencies that they enjoyed displaying at the fair (e.g., refinishing furniture or designing sustainable agriculture plans) with careers in engineering, ecology, nursing, or teaching. While most young people do have the real option of moving away from their hometowns, being part of this rural fair gives them a more complex understanding of what it would take to create a satisfying lifestyle locally.

Second, through the Junior Livestock Auction, the most prominent rite of passage at the fair, future farmers, homemakers, teachers, and business people are dramatically brought into the circle of agribusiness professionals. Sellers in the auction need to be able to internalize the assumptions of the value system that makes the raising—and then selling—of market animals acceptable. Most notably, young sellers need to believe that the sale should not arouse feelings of loss or sadness, at least not in "mature" exhibitors. If the young person is not able to do this, the Junior Livestock Auction may serve as a pivotal point in his or her decision not to engage in livestock farming in the future.

Third, at the Bauer County Fair there are numerous opportunities for those who agree with the dominant paradigms of "traditional" or "family values" to display their messages. The fairgrounds are the field upon which the average person sees inscribed the relationships and ideologies that knit together regional endeavors. By highlighting the production and display of objects and skills, fairtime competitions underscore the values and relationships necessary for their creation and continued use. At the fair people gather with others who share similar views about a moral occupational community that draws inspiration from the values expressed through family farming. Above these clusters of fairgoers, on billboards such as "Farming is Everybody's Bread and Butter," participants are presented with explicit statements about the condensation symbols, understandings, and organizing myths around which their communities coalesce.

Those who disagree—for example, with images of God as "Father" or an embryo's "Right to Life"—are not encouraged to debate the issue. Instead, no one follows up if, for example, they decide not to have their own booth in the Merchant's Hall. The idea that "this is our time," and "if you don't like it here you can go somewhere else" parallels the message given to young people who face the very real option of leaving the county if they do not comfortably fit in.



### Areas for Further Research

There is need for additional research on this and other community celebrations as forums for youth experiences of learning and belonging. As opportunities for intergenerational co-education, they offer opportunities for both intensification of understanding as well as incorporation of diverse groups. However, the extent to which such fairs do not adequately reach out to all members of their host communities needs to be more fully explored. Those disaffected teens who are detached from local social networks are one group that needs to be better integrated; whether the county fair and its associated clubs are the most appropriate means for doing so remains to be seen.

Nonparticipants' experiences and perspectives should be analyzed and then taken into account by those who wish to further expand the constituent base drawn to the fair. Those who feel that the exhibit categories do not match their own interests should be interviewed to see how the fair can become more inclusive of the actual activities and interests of those who live in this rapidly-changing region. While the fair offers opportunities for explicit recognition of a certain array of values and ideologies, organizers need to become more alert and responsive to those who do not feel that they would be heard at this forum. How county residents engage in self-silencing is as important a topic for further study as is an investigation of how people express their mainstream beliefs. If the fair is not to become narrow or stagnant, leaders need to assess the extent to which this celebration is able to accommodate dynamic exchange.

By investigating the fair as celebration, an expanded history of the fair could be written that is not limited to a listing of which buildings were constructed when. Seeing the fair as a reflection of the county leaders' desires to present, to themselves and to others, Bauer County's potential, further research could document histories that illustrate the emerging sense of self as a leading agricultural center. A historical study of how the fair has changed over time, including the significant shift away from adult vocational education to the current emphasis on youth, would be another important contribution. Looking at ways that roles, especially gender roles, have been reified by the structure of exhibit categories (e.g., the "Women's Department") would be valuable. Lastly, a comparison of the changing relationship between school-based learning and fair-time learning could shed light on the differences between a context of celebration and one of academic competition.

This prominent community celebration can play a critical role in drawing out valued elements of the county's heritages and in shaping new conceptions of the county's future. Investing in young people is a critical place to begin. However, future research by the fair's officers as well as researchers interested in the potential of community cel-

ebrations should be concerned with understanding how—and if—young participants make the transition to adult participants. Participating in the Bauer County Fair remains a voluntary activity. This optional, personally sought-out nature of participation underscores many of the most valued aspects of young participants' experiences. It also means that fair leaders will have to continue to maintain an emphasis on reaching out to younger generations in ways that they find meaningful and engaging.

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